

Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies 2018

Church and Society: Rethinking the Ecumenical Future of the Wesleyan Tradition

Rev. Dr. Mark C. Gorman

Introduction

The Wesleyan tradition functions best when, by maintaining its historic twin emphases on social holiness and the means of grace, it illumines, or makes visible, the church of Jesus Christ.¹ This work of illumination constitutes Methodism's ecclesiological vocation. By pursuing social holiness (properly understood)² and the means of grace, the Wesleyan tradition allows the church and those outside the church to see the church for what it is: the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit.³ This can only happen well, however, when those in the Wesleyan tradition find themselves a part of, and not apart from, Christ's universal church. The extent to which Methodist or Wesleyan denominations are not in visible unity with other sisters and brothers in Christ is therefore a key limiting factor in the tradition's vocation to make the church visible.

The question of the visibility of the church finds its roots in both the Scripture and the doctrines of the church, so I begin my argument with a brief overview of issues of visibility raised therein. Of particular interest to Methodists is Article XIX ("Of the Church") of the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, known to and influential on John Wesley. I then analyze the relationship of Wesley's twin emphases of social holiness and the means of grace to Article XIX. For this analytical work I pay special attention to Wesley's "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists" as well as selected sermons. From there I return to the topic of visibility, in order to consider both why the church needs to be seen and the ecclesiological vocation of the Wesleyan tradition.

¹ Throughout this paper I employ "Wesleyan," "Methodist," and related words interchangeably.

² See Andrew C. Thompson, "From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition," *Methodist Review* 3 (2011), 141-172.

³ The church needs to remember that it is both body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, for the very life of the church depends on the Incarnate Christ, whose own life is both embodied in Jesus and conceived as such by the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Incarnate One was both the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, so the church that would be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ must also be.

Finally, I consider the ecumenical implications of my argument. In the last century, Wesleyan and Methodist Christians have been among the earliest, most consistent, and most enthusiastic supporters of the ecumenical movement. Along the way, though, members of the Wesleyan tradition generally have been careful to preserve their own denominations and have tended to find uniting partners within historic Wesleyanism/Methodism, even while agreeing to full communion with non-Wesleyan Protestants. As a conclusion to the work of this paper, however, I propose leaving behind this careful preservation in order to enter an ecumenical future in which the Wesleyan tradition is able to live out its vocation to make visible the whole church of Christ. This involves not only reconciling past divisions but also seeing full communion as an important waypoint on the journey to full union.

The Visibility of the Church: Scripture and Doctrine

To speak of the church's visibility is to introduce some complex and thorny issues.⁴ Certain of these issues are already present in Scriptural discussions; others arise in the formulations of various doctrines throughout church history. There is hardly space here to consider most, let alone all, of these issues, so I focus instead on the two most relevant texts: the

⁴ In Ola Tjørhom's *Visible Church—Visible Unity: Ecumenical Ecclesiology and "The Great Tradition of the Church"* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), reviewed by Risto Saarinen, in *Pro Ecclesia* XV:4: 483-485, Risto Saarinen neatly summarizes these issues with respect to ecumenism; his first point, 484, deserves inclusion at length:

Both "visible" and "invisible" are perceptual and epistemic concepts that make the church dependent on our human senses. This point is not only philosophical since, in our age of mass media, "visibility" is sometimes employed in a narcissist fashion. A true church may remain "hidden," at least according to the mundane criteria of visibility. Its sacramental reality is not conditioned by its visibility.

I have not consulted Tjørhom's work, but I anticipate similar concerns could be raised about my own proposals and offer a brief response here. I believe that the paper as a whole will demonstrate that "visibility" in no way "make[s] the church dependent on our human senses." Rather, the visible church, in being seen (as far as is possible) for what it is, challenges any notion that human senses are sufficient for grappling with the nature of the church (or anything else, for that matter). Furthermore, the "sacramental reality" of a thing may not be "conditioned by its visibility," but it certainly is occluded by its complete *invisibility*. If the bread and the wine are invisible, there is (tautologically) no sign of anything. So it goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for the church. Even the Society of Friends, generally a nonsacramental ecclesial body, gathers together in visible fellowship.

Sermon on the Mount and Article XIX of the Articles of Religion (henceforth simply Article XIX).

In two passages of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus both commends and condemns certain kinds of visibility. First, after concluding the Beatitudes, he says, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16, NRSV). The analogy is straightforward. Those whom Jesus addresses are to act (presumably according to the just-given Beatitudes) publicly, not privately, with two express purposes: to be seen by others, and so that those others may glorify the Father. Although their actions are what is visible, the visibility is not for the sake of those who are seen but for the sake of those who see and, more importantly, for the sake of the Father’s glory. To act privately or in secret would be to act against what Jesus’s audience is, just as hiding a light would defeat the light’s purpose.

Just a few verses later, however, Jesus adds a caveat. “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them,” he says, “for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Mt 6:1 NRSV). This need not be seen as contradicting the earlier verses from Matthew 5. In both passages, Jesus rejects visibility for its own sake or for the honor or pride of the one who is seen. Here, that rejection is explicit and defined; in Matthew 5 it is implied by the stated purpose of visibility. In his sermon on this passage, John Wesley tells his own audience, “If ye seek your own glory, if you have any design to gain the honour that cometh of men, whatever is done with this view is nothing worth; it is not done unto the Lord; he accepteth it

not.”⁵ Adapting the point to the terms of this paper, visibility is intrinsic to the church, but not unproblematically so.

Although visibility in the Sermon on the Mount is clearly about the performance and purpose of certain Christian practices, questions of visibility and invisibility in the development of Christian doctrine have not always been so limited in scope. Oftentimes these questions have dealt, instead, with matters of the nature of the true church (e.g., the *corpus mysticum*) or whether and how the actual membership of the true church might be greater (Karl Rahner) or less (Martin Luther) than what can be seen.

Article XIX, the first of the Articles of Religion to deal with the church, however, incorporates both the Scriptural concern with practices and the later doctrinal developments.⁶ As found in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, Article XIX reads:

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

As the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, have erred; so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of Faith.

Rather than define the nature of the church, the Article foregrounds the church’s visibility.⁷

Three of the signs of the visible church are Christian practices: preaching the Word,

⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 26 “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount Discourse the Sixth,” in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (henceforth *Works*) Volume 1, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), I.2, 574. He amplifies this position in the same sermon, I.4:

When you are fully persuaded in your own mind that by your not concealing the good which is done either you will yourself be enabled, or others excited, to do the more good, then you may not conceal it: then light your light appear and ‘shine to all that are in the house’. But unless where the glory of God and the good of mankind oblige you to the contrary, act in as private and unobserved a manner as the nature of the thing will admit.

⁶ Charlotte Methuen, “‘In which the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments be duly administered’: the Ecclesiology of the Church of England in the context of the European Reformation” in *Modern Believing* 50:9 (April 2009), 5-20, provides a helpful overview of this article in its originating context.

⁷ Like other similar Reformation statements, the Article is obviously contradicting Roman teaching of the time that the visibility of the church was in the institutions, rather than the people. This is all the more interesting because the continental Reformation sources for the language of the Article emphasize the *nature*, and *not* the visibility, of the

administering the sacraments, and “all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”⁸ At the same time a fourth sign, “a congregation of faithful men,” suggests a deeper and necessary reality to the church upon which the church’s visibility is dependent. The attack on “the Church of Rome” in the Article’s second paragraph implies that, whatever one might see in Roman Catholics, the errors “in matters of Faith” contravene the possibility that they are “a congregation of faithful men.”

John Wesley’s writings reflect the significant influence of both the Sermon on the Mount and Article XIX. In the next section I will say more about how the touchstones of Wesley’s movement, social holiness and the means of grace, relate especially to Article XIX. Wesley’s mediation of Article XIX to the Wesleyan tradition, however, is not just through his writings or through his organization of early Methodism. He also bequeathed an edited version of the Article to American Methodists with his *Sunday Service*, where it became Article XIII:

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

That article is preserved by various American Methodist denominations to this day.⁹

John Wesley, Article XIX, and the Church’s Visibility

As a lifelong member of the Church of England, John Wesley was indelibly shaped by its liturgy and doctrines, including Article XIX. In what follows I analyze the theological relationship of two significant Wesleyan emphases, social holiness and the means of grace, to

church. Compare the language of Article XIX with that of Article VIII of the Augsburg Confession, as found in *Apostolic Faith Today: A Handbook for Study*, ed. Hans-Georg Link (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985), 32:

It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.

⁸ This phrase intimates the needfulness of certain church structures, at least those that allow the Word to be preached and the sacraments administered.

⁹ See Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*, revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011).

Article XIX. I say “theological relationship” because I want to be clear about the kind of argument I am making, and the kind I do not intend to make. I am not offering a strictly historical argument. Specifically, I am not arguing that Wesley deliberately organized Methodist societies as way of working out the ecclesiology of Article XIX. Nor am I claiming that Wesley conceived of Methodism for the purpose of achieving greater ecclesial visibility. Rather, in my analysis I show only the existence and some characteristics of a theological relationship between social holiness and the means of grace, on the one hand, and Article XIX, on the other hand. In this I offer for consideration “A Plain Account of the People called Methodists” and several of Wesley’s sermons.

As an early apology for Methodism, Wesley’s “Plain Account” provides a detailed explanation of the major elements of Methodist societies while at the same time demonstrating, or at least attempting to demonstrate, that the societies were not schismatic.¹⁰ Wesley describes Methodism in revivalist terms: a response to the needs and desires of people who wanted “nothing short of or different from ‘the mind that was in Christ’, ‘the image of God’ stamped upon the heart, inward ‘righteousness’, attended with the ‘peace’ of God, and ‘joy in the Holy Ghost’.”¹¹ This transformation of particular people, however, was not to be an individualistic affair; society, or social pursuit of these goods, was not only instrumental but necessary to their sustained reception. Early on, Wesley observes that those who remained committed to this social pursuit were transformed, but those who “were not united together, grew faint in their minds, and fell back into what they were before.”¹²

¹⁰ John Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People called Methodists” (1749) in *Works IX*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 254-280.

¹¹ Wesley, “Plain Account,” I.2.

¹² Wesley, “Plain Account,” I.9.

It was, of course, this social pursuit of holiness that opened Methodists to the charge of schism, a charge Wesley is forced to tackle explicitly in his “Plain Account.” His response, however, is not merely to show that Methodists continue to attend the church service in their local parish, as he elsewhere demands of Methodists who seem to be breaking away from that practice.¹³ Instead, he counterattacks: rather than disrupting the unity of Christians, “we *introduce* Christian fellowship where it was *utterly destroyed*” either through scandalous outward sin (e.g., drunkenness, lying, cheating) or through the failure of well-meaning Christians to maintain genuine fellowship.¹⁴ In terms of Article XIX, this is an attack that is theologically rooted in the “congregation of faithful men” clause. It is also a kind of anti-nominalism: true Christian fellowship must be sought according to what can be seen, not just according to what has been named, as such.

The danger with this attack is that it contains within it a threatening implication: if the Church of England lacks a “congregation of faithful men,” can it be seen as the church of Jesus Christ? Wesley himself does not seem particularly aware of this danger, but four aspects of the “Plain Account” do mitigate against it. First, in defending against the charge of schism, Wesley also acknowledges, if only implicitly here, the legitimacy and even the necessity of the Church of England. The Methodists are not a separate church, nor are they affiliated with one. Therefore, there must be something worthwhile about maintaining ties to the Church of England. Second, Wesley closes this section with an appeal to the fruits of the Holy Spirit, starting with “peace.” The Methodists are not overthrowing the Church of England but following the lead of the Spirit.

¹³ See, for example, John Wesley, “Gair i’r Methodist (‘A Word to a Methodist’),” in *Works IX*, 238-246, or, Wesley, Sermon 104 “On Attending the Church Service,” in *Works III*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 464-478.

¹⁴ Wesley, “Plain Account,” I.11, emphasis original. Consider this barrage of rhetorical questions: “Which of those true Christians ever had any such fellowship with these? Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them as they had need?”

Third, about halfway through the account, Wesley mentions reading letters “received from time to time of the work which God is carrying on in the earth, both in our own and other countries, not among us alone, but among those of various opinions and denominations.”¹⁵ He did this, he says, to avoid “that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves”;¹⁶ the revival the Methodists was not meant to be exclusive. If God’s work was happening in other parts of the Church of England without the Methodists, that was not a problem. Finally, by showing that the Methodists *were* a fellowship of faithful Christians that remained loyal, as a whole, to the Church of England, Wesley’s “Plain Account” offers the “congregation of faithful men” that Article XIX demands. It is not missing from the Church of England; it is found among the Methodists.¹⁷

The issue of schism, both as an accusation by outsiders and a desire from insiders, dogged Wesley for his whole life, forcing Wesley to return repeatedly to the subject of the church.¹⁸ Far from an attenuated ecclesiology, Wesley steadfastly envisions a church in which Article XIX’s “congregation of faithful men” holds center stage. In his sermon “Of the Church,” written four decades after the “Plain Account,” Wesley builds to a climatic exhortation:

In the meantime let all those who are real members of the church see that they walk holy and unblameable in all things. ‘Ye are the light of the world!’ Ye are ‘a city set upon a hill, and cannot be hid. O let your light shine before men!’ Show them your faith by your works. Let them see by the whole tenor of your conversation that your hope is all laid up above. Let all your words and actions evidence the spirit whereby you are animated!¹⁹

¹⁵ Wesley, “Plain Account,” V. Though brief, this section of “Plain Account” has important ecumenical implications.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Though, per the previous point, not exclusively so.

¹⁸ Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 238, helpfully corrects a misperception of Wesley when he writes, “To be sure, the father of Methodism thought often of the nature of the church and its proper parameters as he considered his own ministry, his distinct call, of spreading scriptural holiness across the land.”

¹⁹ John Wesley, Sermon 74 “Of the Church”, in *Works III*, [III.]30.

For Wesley the church is primarily people: faithful people who demonstrate their fidelity by their holiness.²⁰ And this church is to be seen for what it is. Wesley claims that the confession of “holy catholic church” in the Apostles’ Creed means “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.”²¹ Holiness is a definitional element of the church, which in Wesley’s hands, does not result in an appeal to the invisibly holy but, rather, an exhortation to the holy ones to make visible their sanctity.²²

In several sections of this sermon Wesley engages Article XIX. He subscribes to the article, submitting to the authority of the Church of England to issue it, but not without qualification. Though he will conclude the sermon with a rousing endorsement of (his understanding of) its “faithful men” clause, Wesley expresses reservations about excluding “those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines... are sometimes, yea, frequently preached” as well as “all those congregations in which the sacraments are not ‘duly administered,’” even Roman Catholic congregations.²³ It would be mistake, however, to read too much into Wesley’s qualifiers. Nothing about Wesley’s life or corpus as a whole suggests that he was indifferent either to “unscriptural doctrines” or to the administration of the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The qualifiers, instead, reveal Wesley’s determined focus on the holiness of the people, the social holiness, that was so central to his

²⁰ A word that receives far less attention in the “Plain Account” than in this sermon.

²¹ Wesley, Sermon 74, [III.]28.

²² By deploying this definition, Wesley rules sinners out of the church. An ecclesiology that has no room for sinners is problematic (Outler accuses Wesley of skirting close to Donatism), but Wesley is not really offering a fully developed ecclesiology in Sermon 74. Here we have an ecclesiological vocation, a call for the Methodists to demonstrate that they are part of Christ’s church, not separating even from the Church of England. Writing on a similar passage in Wesley’s “Letter to a Roman Catholic,” Geoffrey Wainwright, “Ecclesiological Tendencies in Luther and Wesley,” in *Methodists in Dialogue* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 112, comments, “For all the dangers of hypocrisy I would rather interpret the phenomenon as ‘ethical seriousness.’ Wesley saw it to be Methodism’s *providential call* to ‘spread scriptural holiness through the land’” (emphasis added).

²³ Wesley, Sermon 74, [I.]19.

Methodist movement.²⁴ Only now, the Methodist upon whom Wesley called to make their holiness known draw from more than just the Church of England. So perhaps now, also, their vocation has widened, offering Wesley's understanding of "faithful men" to Christ's universal church.

Whether in the "Plain Account" or in the sermon "Of the Church," Wesley's emphasis on social holiness pairs well with Article XIX's "congregation of faithful men." His writings also betray a refusal to reduce the visibility of the church to its enduring institutions; this also he has in common with Article XIX. Yet Article XIX is not entirely anti-institutional, either. The final dependent clause of its first paragraph, "in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same," hints that structures and polity, the stuff of institutions, are necessary, even if they are not primary for seeing the church. What is necessary to ensure the preaching of the pure Word or the due administration of the sacraments may be debated, but that does not mean *nothing* is necessary to maintain those goods. Likewise, Wesley's emphasis on social holiness relegated such concerns to a secondary status, but his emphasis on the means of grace provides a countervailing force.²⁵

One place to see this countervailing force at work is in Sermon 24, Wesley's fourth discourse on the Sermon on the Mount.²⁶ There are two major, interrelated themes to this sermon. First is the inherent sociality of the Christian faith: "Christianity is essentially a social

²⁴ Two further points are worth adding as an aside. First, it is possible that Wesley is guarding his flank with these comments, in which case they may be understood better in conjunction with Sermon 104 ("On Attending the Church Service"), which is itself Wesley's version of anti-Donatism. If Methodists were urging departure from congregations over matters distinctly clerical in nature (preaching, administering the sacraments), it would behoove Wesley to downplay these matters in any discussion of the church. Second, since, as the "Plain Account" establishes early on, Methodists were primarily a society, it makes sense that Wesley would emphasize the part of Article XIX with which his movement wanted most closely to identify.

²⁵ Wesley's own administration of Methodism is still another check against complete anti-institutionalism.

²⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 24 "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount Discourse the Fourth," in *Works* I, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 531-549.

religion, and... to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.”²⁷ Second is Wesley’s desire to correct the “great mistake to suppose that an attention to those outward things whereto the providence of God hath called us is any clog to a Christian.”²⁸ Thus this sermon builds a bridge between social holiness and the ordinances of God, upon which the General Rules called Methodists to attend.

Wesley does not use the term “means of grace” in this discourse, but he does speak at length about various ordinances of God,²⁹ especially showing mercy and compassion, peacemaking, and, above all, worship. In this case, “ordinances” should be seen as a broad term incorporating the instituted and providential means of grace. Throughout the text, the unspoken threat Wesley addresses is quietism: a belief that social holiness could be achieved, or maintained, invisibly to the wider world. For Wesley, quietism goes against the ordinances of God, which are visibly pursued and visibly enacted. If it was true that some had “abused the ordinances of God, mistaking the means for the end, supposing that the doing these or some other outward works either was the religion of Jesus Christ or would be accepted in its place,” that truth did not displace the outward works, which one must pursue “with a constant eye to the renewal of your soul in righteousness and true holiness.”³⁰

Most of the ordinances Wesley names in Sermon 24 fall outside the purview of Article XIX, but the third, worship, does relate directly to that article’s “pure Word” and Sacraments. Wesley’s affinity for the sacrament of Holy Communion is well-documented, perhaps most boldly in the title of Sermon 101, “The Duty of Constant Communion.”³¹ Theologically

²⁷ Wesley, Sermon 24, I.1.

²⁸ Wesley, Sermon 24, II.5.

²⁹ Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine*, 80, writes in way that suggests “means of grace” and “ordinances of God” are basically interchangeable terms.

³⁰ Wesley, Sermon 24, II.6.

³¹ Wesley, Sermon 101, “The Duty of Constant Communion, in *Works* III, 428-439.

speaking, this is also the ordinance, or means of grace, that binds Wesley and his Methodists most closely to the Church of England. In “The Duty of Constant Communion,” Wesley tries to overcome the reluctance of some people to receive communion frequently because of concerns about their “worthiness.” He encourages them, instead, to receive as often as possible, and he even appeals, near the end, to the practice of the Church of England, which “takes all possible care that the sacrament be duly administered [N.B. the language of Article XIX], wherever the Common Prayer is read, every Sunday and holiday in the year.”³² In order for Methodists to follow Wesley’s lead in receiving communion frequently, Wesley needed a church to which they could turn, reliably, for the administration of the sacrament.

Early Methodism was about forming “a congregation of faithful men,” whose holiness made them a light to the world. That, to Wesley, was essential, but that is only one element of the visibility of the church Article XIX foregrounds. Also needed are means of grace, including the pure Word preached and the duly administered sacraments, as well as whatever makes those means of grace possible. Since Wesley understood that social holiness could not be divorced from the means of grace, early Methodism, theologically speaking, was predicated on the fullness of Article XIX that only the Church of England, initially, or Christ’s universal church, later, could provide.³³ If, theologically speaking, in Wesley’s estimation, the church of his day needed the Methodist revival, it is also true that the Methodist revival needed the church.³⁴ In

³² Wesley, Sermon 101, II.20.

³³ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 241, explains, “The larger church provides the liturgical worship and sacraments that are indispensable to the empowerment and patterning for Christian life.”

³⁴ Writing about developments in Methodism, Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 252-253, argues that Methodism required an environment of “catholicity” in which to function, an environment that was integral to its identity as Wesley had understood so well. Indeed, apart from its mission and rather functional understanding of the church, Methodism would likely lose its way, identity, and purpose... [H]e seemed to presume that the “catholic, traditional, and institutional church... nevertheless needed an evangelical order within it in order to maintain the power of religion... For as Methodism needed the Anglican Church as its context, so, too, did Anglicanism need the Methodist society for its witness.

living holy lives while attending to the Word and Sacraments early Methodists claimed an ecclesiological vocation regarding the visibility of the church.

The Visibility of the Church: Illumining the Church

Questions of sight and lack of sight, of things seen and unseen, of seeing and believing, haunt the Scriptures and the church. Looking for the wrong things can lead to missing what God wants people to see, but not looking at all can be an equally grave mistake. Seeing can lead to believing, but believing is its own kind of seeing. Blindness can be an affliction in need of a cure, or a gift that allows for better sight. And signs are things seen that allow for a vision of the unseeable.

Though Jesus commands his followers to be a light and a city on a hill, the church's visibility is not a given. There are other options.³⁵ The church can become invisible, disappearing from the sight of those inside and outside the church. This can happen literally, when a congregation closes or leaves a community, and it can happen more figuratively, when a congregation continues to meet but goes unnoticed. In times of persecution, the church may require invisibility for the safety of its members.

Another option is for the church to be seen as something other than what it really is. Article XIX more or less sidesteps the question of the nature of the church, but Scripture and the creeds furnish the essentials. The body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the *ekklesia*, the communion of the faithful: this is how the church should want to be seen. Christ himself warns

I appreciate Collins's summary here, but I wish to stress an important difference between his point and my own. It is not a functional understanding of the church itself, but instead an ecclesiological vocation, or, perhaps better, two ecclesial vocations: the first, for the church to be visible as Christ's church; the second, for Methodists to illumine the church by emphasizing holiness. Scriptural images for the church like body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, as well as Wesley's own insistence that the church *is* holy, suggest the church itself is more than just a means to an end, however good the end is. The church, we might say, is a graced means of grace, both an end and a means.

³⁵ For a harrowing read on the necessity of the church's visibility and the ways it can go unseen with devastating consequences, see William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998).

of the danger of the church wanting to be seen for itself, to have the eyes of the world upon the church for the sake of the church and its reputation, rather than for the sake of the glory of God, but there are other ways of being mis-seen. Today some might mistake the church for an arm of a political party, or for a social club, or for a non-profit organization. In Wesley's day it might have been seen by some as an extension of royal power or as a cultural guarantor.³⁶

The church needs to be seen because Christ teaches that the church should be seen. The church needs to be seen as the church because it is possible for the church to become invisible or to be seen as something else. Thus the church has a stake in examining how it is seen and in seeking to be seen more and more as the church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

“Holiness” as a soteriological feature of early Methodism is well-documented and oft-invoked. It is also, I suggest, an ecclesiological feature of the Wesleyan tradition.³⁷ “Holiness” is the early Methodist response to the question, “How can the church be seen more as the church of Jesus Christ?” When Wesley is accused of schism, he dares to ask, in effect, “Where is this church from which we are supposed to be breaking off?” Without social holiness, the church slides toward invisibility. This is not just Wesleyan, of course. In Scripture, holiness is beauty; holiness is light. Holiness is a characteristic, a sign, that points beyond itself to God, who alone is holy.

³⁶ Concerning the Church of England during John Wesley's childhood, Richard P. Heitzenrater, “The Church of England and Religious Societies,” in *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 36, says, “The Church may have been in intimate touch with the life of the age but did not generally stand conspicuously above it.”

³⁷ Though not, strictly speaking, about holiness, Gregory S. Clapper, *The Renewal of the Heart Is the Mission of the Church: Wesley's Heart Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), comes close to expressing a similar ecclesiological vocation, but, interestingly, in his work the vocation of the church is centered on the individual (and especially the individual's “heart”), which, I think, is to collapse ecclesiology into soteriology.

As an ecclesiological feature of the Wesleyan tradition, therefore, “holiness” is not the Methodist answer to the question, “What is the church?” It is in the nature of the church to be holy, but there is more to the church than holiness. “Holiness” is not even the exhaustive answer to the question, “How is the church seen as the church of Jesus Christ?” With roots in the Anglican tradition, the Wesleyan answer would necessarily include preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. And with a strong sense of the diverse means of grace, the Wesleyan answer would also likely include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned and the sick, searching the Scriptures, watching over one another in love, and many other such practices.

Holiness is only a part of ecclesiology, even of Methodist ecclesiology. That part, however, is definitive for early Methodism and, I argue, should be definitive for faithful living within the Wesleyan tradition in any age. Holiness is the ecclesiological vocation of Methodists. From social holiness to the means of grace to the doctrine of Christian perfection, holiness defines how Methodists are to help the universal, catholic, church of Jesus Christ to be seen only as Christ’s church. The Methodist ecclesiological vocation is illumination: shining the light of holiness on the church that is preaching the Word and administering the sacraments, in order that the church might be seen, so that all may glorify God. There is an analogical sequence. The Wesleyan tradition is to the catholic church what the church is to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Therefore, it is essential to the Wesleyan tradition’s own ecclesiological vocation that Methodists be seen in union with the catholic church. Otherwise, when Methodists embrace and shine forth the light of holiness, it can look like they are illuminating themselves and not

something greater.³⁸ Holiness can become a spotlight rather than a beacon. On their own, apart from other Christians, apart from the universal church, Methodists cannot fulfill their ecclesiological vocation.

Visibility, the Wesleyan Tradition, and Ecumenism

In recent decades, the visibility of the church has become the province not only of Scripture and doctrine but also of the ecumenical movement. Commenting on the 1952 Lund Conference's report's "rejection of the concept of the *two* churches [the visible church militant and the invisible church triumphant]," Robert Earl Cushman suggested that "[t]he only way out of our predicament [of ecclesiastical disunity] now, is either to deny that they are and reassert a temporarily suppressed opinion that ours is the true church, or to achieve a historical union in which the eschatological reality[of full unity in Christ] may find a habitation and a home."³⁹

Thankfully, few churches have pursued the first of Cushman's options, while the second option has been developed in multilateral and bilateral dialogues that have reshaped the ecumenical landscape. Rather than collapsing the eschatological reality of the unity of Christ's church into the historical present, and thus pursuing a realized eschatology that places a Pelagian burden on ecumenists, these dialogues have instead spoken of a desired present unity in sacramental terms. Referring to reports from the Methodist-Catholic dialogues, Cardinal Walter Kasper notes, "The Methodist-Catholic dialogue has increasingly used sacramental language of

³⁸ In their holiness, do not Methodists allow Christ (who is greater than they) to be seen? Yes, in a limited way (I say more about Methodism's standing as a church in the following section). When Methodism is not in visible unity with the catholic church, Methodism is unable to shine that light on the whole of Christ. Because of that, the line between illuminating themselves and illuminating Christ becomes much finer. A flashlight shining directly on the elbow does allow the body of the person whose elbow it is to be seen, but the vision permitted is narrow and may give several false impressions: that the elbow is the most important part of the body, for example, or that the body functions chiefly for the sake of the elbow and not the other way around.

³⁹ Robert Earl Cushman, "The Lund Conference: The Dilemma of Ecumenists," in *Faith Seeking Understanding: Essays Theological and Critical* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981), 264.

the Church.”⁴⁰ Speaking of the sacramentality of the church allows for a faithful embrace of the church’s visibility;⁴¹ when the church is viewed sacramentally, the church invites those who see it to the greater reality and glory of God.⁴²

From John Mott in the very beginning to Geoffrey Wainwright in the great triumph of the Lima text and beyond, members of the Wesleyan tradition have played an outsized role in the ecumenical movement. A certain strand of Methodists involved in the ecumenical movement has suggested that this involvement is due to a deficit on the part of the Wesleyan tradition. Albert Outler famously argued “that Methodism’s unique ecclesiological pattern was really designed to function best *within* an encompassing of *catholicity*... We don’t do as well by our lonesome as some other denominations appear to do—and for a good reason.”⁴³ Deliberately echoing this earlier statement by Outler, Edgardo Colón-Emeric has written that “the Methodists are theologically and practically *une église manqué*.”⁴⁴ Others have pushed back against this tendency. Geoffrey Wainwright reminds Methodists that “all *denominational* claims to the word *church*, for example, “The Methodist Church,” run counter to the New Testament... [because] [t]he existence of *denominations*—which so far in history always implies *divisions*—calls into

⁴⁰ Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (London: Continuum, 2009), 71.

⁴¹ Speaking of the sacramentality of the church also allows for a recognition that the church is an act of God into which human beings are called to participate. This happens through the gift of baptism that leads to Holy Communion.

⁴² I limit my discussion of ecumenical dialogues to Methodist-Catholic bilateral discussions both for reasons of space and because, as Geoffrey Wainwright, “Methodist-Roman Catholic International Dialogue” in *Celebrating a Century of Ecumenism: Exploring the Achievements of International Dialogue*, ed. John A. Radano (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 98, says, “It was with ‘Nairobi 1986’... that ecclesiology began to establish itself as henceforth the governing theme of the Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue.”

⁴³ Albert C. Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964). The paper, of course, was originally presented at the Oxford Institute.

⁴⁴ Edgardo Colón-Emeric, *Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 145.

question the reality of *the Church*.”⁴⁵ If Methodists are *une église manqué*, they are not uniquely so. Wainwright would prefer to speak of Methodism’s gifts than its unique shortcomings.

Similarly, and more recently, Justus H. Hunter argues:

For any party involved, there are two tasks for gift-sharing: first, the receipt of gifts from others; second, the offering of *our own* gifts. Each partner in ecumenical dialogue possesses their own labor in both of these tasks. Methodists worried over their inferiority would do well to consider the challenge and affirmation embodied in the latter. Whatever the solution to our tensions, the Outlerian subsumption will not do; otherwise, the church loses a precious gift.⁴⁶

Following Catholic theologian Dennis Doyle, Hunter advocates a Methodist communion ecclesiology instead, which he finds reflected in recent Methodist-Catholic dialogue reports.⁴⁷

From the perspective of the ecclesiology of Article XIX, which emphasizes the visible congregation and its practices, the Methodist heritage is, by its own standards, a church, or at least comprised of churches. In Wesleyan congregations all over the world, faithful followers of Jesus Christ gather, hear the Word of God preached, and celebrate the sacraments in due order. Those congregations belong to connections that sustain the discipline necessary to ensure this due order. That these congregations are flawed and that Article XIX may not satisfy the ecclesiological requirements of other traditions are not sufficient objections to overcome the *prima facie* case for Methodism’s self-understanding as a church. Even Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox recognize *something* of the church in Methodism, or else those members of those traditions would consider dialogues with Methodists to be interfaith, rather than ecumenical, meetings.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Wainwright, “Ecclesial Location and Ecumenical Vocation,” in *The Ecumenical Moment: Crisis and Opportunity for the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 195.

⁴⁶ Justus H. Hunter, “Toward a Methodist Communion Ecclesiology,” *Ecclesiology* 9 (2013), 14.

⁴⁷ Though I have great respect for Hunter and find his position intriguing, I cannot help but point out that he draws from a Roman Catholic appropriation of an Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology at the same time that he criticizes Outler for finding insufficient resources within the Methodist tradition for a full ecclesiology.

Yet: the ecclesiological vocation of the Wesleyan tradition must leave Methodists unsatisfied with this *prima facie* case. Holiness, essential to rendering the church visible as the church of Jesus Christ, was “the key to all Wesley’s ecclesiology, theoretical and practical,”⁴⁸ but holiness that points to oneself is no holiness at all. The pursuit of holiness leading to Christian perfection that is at the heart of the Wesleyan tradition is not, ultimately, for the sake of the purity of the individual or the sanctity of a movement or denomination. The pursuit of holiness allows for a life that glorifies God and invites others also to glorify God. Methodism is indeed *une église manqué*, not because of its weaknesses and shortcomings (though there are many), but because of its innate ecclesiological vocation to illumine the church, the universal, catholic church, of Jesus Christ through holiness.

Thus it should come as no surprise that the recent ecumenical discussions of the sacramentality of the church have occurred at the same time as a concomitant rise in mutual interest in holiness. According to Lorelei Fuchs, early Methodist-Catholic dialogues established the importance of *koinonia*, or “the believing community,” which allowed for further conversation about “[l]ife together in the believing community [which] is then nurtured and celebrated in the *koinonia* of apostolic teaching, the breaking of bread and the prayers.”⁴⁹ Methodists, however, cannot speak of *koinonia* without also speaking of holiness. As early as the 1971 Denver Report there is recognition that “the cultivation of ‘Scriptural holiness’ and its spread has always been seen by Methodists as a common task, making the Church a fellowship rather than a hierarchy.”⁵⁰ This cultivation of holiness places the instituted means of grace,

⁴⁸ Wainwright, “Ecclesial Location,” 209.

⁴⁹ Lorelei F. Fuchs, *Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology: From Foundations through Dialogue to Symbolic Competence for Communionality* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 228.

⁵⁰ *Denver Report, 1971 I.7*, in *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, ed. Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 309.

baptism and Holy Communion, centrally in ecumenical relations. Fuchs observes that “Methodists and Roman Catholics look to baptism and eucharist as the loci where the churches must visibly manifest their communion in fullness.”⁵¹

Most recently, in “The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory,” Methodists and Catholics agreed, among other things, that “a loving God graciously calls all people to respond to an invitation to holy living in a familial relationship with God,” that “[t]he call to holiness is also a call to unity in the Church,” and that “consideration of the saving work of Christ [including the gift of holiness] is inseparable from ecclesiology.”⁵² In addition to underscoring the historic importance of holiness to the Wesleyan tradition, statements like these also function as Methodist concessions that holiness is not proprietary to our tradition.⁵³ Unlike John Wesley in his “Plain Account,” who could not find a “congregation of faithful men” in many Church of England parishes, Methodists in ecumenical dialogue do see such congregations, such as fellowships, in their dialogue partners.

In the ecumenical context, then, faithfulness to the Wesleyan ecclesiological vocation is illuminating Christ’s universal church by offering the church its own faithful congregations, in order to realize a greater unity by which the church is seen more fully as the church of Christ because it is a unity in and of holiness. Methodists must seek this unity for the sake of fulfilling their ecclesiological vocation. And the recent history of the Wesleyan tradition shows Methodists seeking this unity time after time. Within Methodism itself there has been the series of

⁵¹ Fuchs, *Koinonia*, 232.

⁵² “The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory,” §1, 5, 10, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/meth-council-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20171018_report-joint-commission_en.html. Accessed 6 July 2018.

⁵³ Just a few months after the presentation of “The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory” to Pope Francis, the pope released his beautiful exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, “on the call to holiness in today’s world,” a further reminder that Methodists do not have a monopoly on holiness. See http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html. Accessed 6 July 2018.

reunifications that led to The United Methodist Church; the creation of the World Methodist Council; and, in certain settings, the integration of Methodists into a uniting church. When The United Methodist Church formed, it included a constitutional requirement for the denomination to “pray, seek, and work for unity at all levels of church life: through world relationships with other Methodist churches and united churches . . . , through councils of churches, and through plans of union and covenantal relationships.”⁵⁴ Full communion with once-separated churches outside Methodism, like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Moravian Church, has now become a reality for The United Methodist Church, and a collegial spirit has replaced antagonism even with denominations where full communion, or even significant dialogue, is still far from accomplished.⁵⁵

Certainly the unification within Methodism, entries into full communion, and the ongoing dialogues are signs that the eschatological reality of Christ’s united church is breaking in to our present age, but they are no reason for complacency. The United Methodist Church faces the real possibility of fracturing in the near future; the Episcopal Church, USA, has signaled that full communion between it and the UMC will not happen soon; and “The Call to Holiness” laments the modest impact Methodist-Catholic dialogue has had at the local level. Moreover, efforts to agree to full communion may, in fact, be an inadvertent means of continuing the church’s present

⁵⁴ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Church Publishing House, 2016), ¶6.

⁵⁵ This is not just at the denominational level. I meet monthly with other area pastors, a group that includes United Methodists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians. We sponsor joint worship services twice a year that rotate between our congregations and a Lenten series taught by the pastors. I have co-versed at Holy Communion with a Lutheran pastor twice through this group, and this summer (8 July 2018) I participated in the group’s second pulpit swap in three years. Not only is this increased unity visible to congregants of the various churches involved; we also raise funds for local and global mission projects. At the same time, I have gotten Centre United Methodist Church, the congregation I pastor, involved with Harford County Hope for the Homeless Alliance, which hosts an emergency homeless shelter in winter months that rotates between different area congregations of many different backgrounds, denominational and non-denominational. When the shelter comes to Centre, people from AME, Baptist, Free Methodist, Non-denominational, and Roman Catholic congregations have been invited, intentionally, to serve guests with us. Although this is only anecdotal, I know from conversations with many Methodist colleagues that this kind of ecumenical engagement is commonplace.

state of disunity. First, full communion, though requiring arduous dialogue, asks for very little change from constituents in the agreement, especially in change noticeable at the local level.⁵⁶ Second, as a goal achieved primarily through dialogue, full communion also therefore remains an inconsistently visible act of unity; many both within and without the church may never actually see it on the ground. Third, a concern D. Stephen Long has raised with respect to recent interest in Wesley's "Catholic Spirit" among United Methodists may also be relevant to full communion: that "it distills Christianity to its 'essence,' identifying the minimal doctrinal commitments necessary... [and then] all other aspects of Christian faith... are situated within a realm where each person can 'think and let think' ... [which] is a quintessential Protestant endeavor" and not a truly catholic endeavor.⁵⁷ So far, Methodist ecumenical involvement has generally maintained a careful preservation of denominational identity.⁵⁸

Nonetheless, reconciliation, whether between individual persons or among the divided churches, is a lengthy process. Difficulties, even setbacks, are to be expected, and progress, however incremental, should be celebrated. Methodists should be glad for anything that illumines the church as Christ's body and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Staying true to their Wesleyan heritage, however, means pressing onward, beyond dialogue, past full communion, to a visible unity with the fullest representation of Christ's universal church possible.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Roger Schutz, *The Power of the Provisional*, trans. Philip Parsons and Timothy Wilson (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 9, frames the problem well: "Dialogue is indispensable in the search for unity, but on condition that it does not rest content with a static denominational truce."

⁵⁷ D. Stephen Long, "The Non-Catholicity of a Catholic Spirit" in *Embodying Wesley's Catholic Spirit*, ed. Daniel Castelo (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2017).

⁵⁸ The uniting churches in various places may be an exception to this rule.

⁵⁹ The challenge of Schutz, *Power*, frontmatter, has not changed: "Ecumenism can only survive today if there is a dynamism which drives it to explore ever new dimensions." Marilyn McCord Adams, "Recent Developments in the Anglican Communion, or Ecumenism Misapplied," in *Modern Believing* 52:3 (July 2011), 4-14, has raised important concerns about the goal of visible unity which she, 5, says "tends to subvert prophetic Gospel initiatives."

Toward a Wesleyan Ecumenical Future

What might visible unity, beyond full communion, look like?⁶⁰ In the early days of Methodism, it looked like groups of faithful people attending services of Word and sacrament and then living out mutually accountable fellowship through various meetings with each other in between such services. A way of life together emerged from those early meetings, which generations of the Wesleyan tradition have attempted to articulate, preserve, and develop, formally and informally. One possibility would be a return to that history through Methodists merging with other denominations on terms that allow for certain Wesleyan distinctives to be preserved and exercised. Albert Outler once spoke of a return to Methodism as a movement; Geoffrey Wainwright has preferred recasting the Wesleyan tradition as an order, like the Jesuits or the Little Sisters of St. Francis. This would permit Methodists to claim more of their heritage as gifts offered to the catholic church: the system of small groups, for example, as a means of pursuing holiness.⁶¹ Another possibility would be for full assimilation into a larger communion. In this scenario Methodists would function more as yeast in the dough than as a recognized or semiautonomous group.

Still a third answer might be an intermediate stage in which Methodists part ways from each other in order to pursue multiple scenarios (perhaps both the two just identified as well as a third or fourth option). Were this to result in more Methodist denominations, the Wesleyan ecclesiological vocation would be frustrated, but if Methodists were to disperse to already-existing churches, that might strengthen those churches, allow Methodists to continue pursuing

⁶⁰ Wainwright, "Ecclesial Location," 196, boldly asks, "What is the *Ecclesia* in which Methodist writers sometimes rather too cozily claim for themselves the status of an *ecclesiola*?"

⁶¹ Scott Kisker, "Visibly Invisible," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 53:1 (Spring 2018): 7-18, identifies these small groups as essential to the Wesleyan tradition's ability to make the church visible as the church.

holiness as a way of illumining the churches where they are, and give time and even impetus for those other churches to work out ways for greater unity among themselves.

No matter how it is pursued, visible unity will require the Wesleyan tradition to change, and any change will doubtless produce anxiety among Methodists. Though John Wesley once spoke of the Methodist movement one day disappearing, perhaps greater assurance for the pursuit of unity in holiness can be drawn from the founder of a contemporary order that has a strong sense of ecclesiological vocation, Brother Roger, of Taizé, France. When his community made a radical pivot in the 1960s to focus on young people's ministries, Brother Roger wrote a book called *Dynamique du provisoire: The Power of the Provisional*. The pivot involved the community divesting itself of some aspects of its Swiss Reformed heritage for the sake of its vocation. Brother Roger understood that the strength of a Christian community does not reside in its permanence but in its visibility as a community that belongs to Jesus Christ. At the time, he warned his audience, "Do we not see in the history of Christians so many institutions which lost the provisional character with which they began, in order to survive the passage of time? The Christian horizon of those who belong to these institutions is contracted."⁶² Today, Taizé flourishes as an ecumenical welcome center for people from all over the world to encounter Christ through prayer, simple living, and Bible study.

The extent to which Methodist or Wesleyan denominations are not in full communion with other sisters and brothers in Christ is also a key limiting factor in the tradition's vocation to make visible Christ's church, but full communion is only an important waypoint on the journey to full union. That union is assured, eschatologically, by the oneness of Christ and the unity of the Holy Spirit, who call every part of the church to offer its gifts in order to fulfill Christ's

⁶² Schutz, Power, 67.

command *ut unum sint*.⁶³ In the strength of their ecclesiological vocation of holiness may those in the Wesleyan tradition find the grace of courage to step forward into an ecumenical future that is radically different from the only ecclesial context they have ever known.

⁶³ Scott Kisker, "Visibly Invisible," 17, writes, "Our communities are intended to be icons of the eschaton, glimpses of God's life-giving order, and signs of the new creation."