

**Inclusion or Exclusion: Wesleyan Eucharistic Theology of Mission and Reconciliation**  
**Mark A. Maddix**  
**Point Loma Nazarene University**

Pastors and church leaders in the Wesleyan family continue to be influenced by an array of missional strategies as an attempt to cross borders to reach others and deepen the faith of their congregants. The more recent missional church movement,<sup>1</sup> which developed nearly a decade ago, and the emerging church movement,<sup>2</sup> have had varying success in incarnating the gospel within specific cultural contexts. Others have elicited sociological findings and church growth strategies as an attempt to engage in mission.<sup>3</sup> These and other approaches fill conferences and pastors' libraries with resources that are often devoid of theological orientation and reflection.

While the verdict is out to the impact of these missional strategies in North America congregations continues to decline, and pastors are struggling to appropriate ways to cross borders in mission. Given these cultural and sociological endeavors, we turn to our theological founding predecessors, John and Charles Wesley for guidance in this endeavor. While we recognize the Wesleys' ministry was in a particular time and context, and not all of their ministry approaches are applicable, could the Wesleyan tradition could gain insights from their view of ecclesiology and mission as a means of spiritual renewal for the church today? Could John Wesley's Eucharistic theology has something to say to the contemporary church about mission and reconciliation? While reaching to the past does not always bear ample fruit, this paper attempts to explore Wesley's ecclesiological theology of mission, particularly as it relates to

---

<sup>1</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

<sup>2</sup> See Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church; Vintage Christianity for New Generations*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Bill Hybels and Rick Warren's congregations are example of seeker sensitive congregations.

participation in the Eucharist. Does Wesleyan Eucharistic theology has implications for the contemporary church as it seeks to engage in a mission and reconciliation?

## **Ecclesiology and Mission**

William Abraham indicates that Methodists and Wesleyans are at a crossroads with respect to their theological identity.<sup>4</sup> This crossroads is filled with a variety of attempts to appropriate a Wesleyan theology of the church and mission. One possible way to address this crossroads is to consider the relationship between the church and mission, from the perspective of Wesley's Eucharist theology. Often church and mission are viewed as mutually exclusive. Mission can be a shorthand term for evangelism or outreach to the unchurched. Missional theology is a reaction to the spiritual death of local congregations. It attempts to send the church back into the world. Missional theology focuses primarily on a theology of God that is often devoid of ecclesiological roots.<sup>5</sup> The problem is that being missional without a Eucharistic

---

<sup>4</sup> William J. Abraham, Ecclesiology and Eucharist, In Jason Vickers, ed. *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist: The Presence of God for Christian Life and Ministry*. (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2016), 69.

<sup>5</sup> Missional theology begins with the nature of the Triune God as a sending God who sent Jesus in the world and the church is sent as a witness to the world. The missional pattern of the triune God is captured in the words of Jesus who told his disciples: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). God the Father sent Jesus Christ to redeem all of humanity and creation; Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to empower and guide us; and the triune God sent the church into the world to participate in the new creation. God's mission in the world calls, gathers, and sends the church into the world to participate in God's mission. The nature of the church remains to seek and follow wherever God continues to be active in the world. Some aspects of missional theology is rooted in ecclesiology. For example, Scot McKnight in his book *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016) argues that mission is rooted in the local church particularly around Word and Table. See also Conner, Benjamin T. *Practicing witness: A Missional vision of Christian Practices*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011); Helland, Roger and Leonard Hjalmarsen. *Missional spirituality: Embodying God's love from the inside out*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2011); Mark A. Maddix and Jay Akkerman, eds. *Missional Discipleship: Partners in God's Redemptive Mission* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2013). McKnight and others are an example of a correction of earlier leaders in the missional movement that focused on moving mission from the local church to the community. See Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2003); Reggie McNeal, *Kingdom Come: Why We must Give up Our Obsession with Fixing the church and what to do about it*. (Carol Springs, IL: Tyndale House Publishing). I also recognize that the Old Testament testifies to the people of Israel as the missional people of God. See Brad Kelle's book, *Telling the Old Testament Story: God's Mission and God's People*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017). I am not denying the missional focus of the Old Testament but I want to give particular focus to Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection that provides the fullness of the nature of the Triune God. Therefore, participation in the Eucharist is the primary means of grace whereby Christ is present and mission of the church begins.

theology results in a crippled church that needs healing, renewal, and eschatological hope. While evangelism and outreach are vital aspects of mission, they are not complete unless they are grounded in Eucharistic theology. God's mission includes the church where God is worshipped through Word and sacrament. The celebration of Word and Table is part of mission, or better stated, it is where mission begins. Mission begins as congregants participate in the broken and poured out body and blood of Christ. As congregants participate in the Eucharist, as a means of grace, they receive healing, reconciliation, and participate in the mission of God. In other words, communion and mission are tightly held together in a single vision. As Pelzel says, "It is my conviction that the rhythm of communion and mission, gathering and sending out—rooted in the very life of God, celebrated in the liturgy, and lived out in the world---provide the only adequate framework for gaining a comprehensive vision of the Church."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the church.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Anderson states, "the challenge faced in many in the Wesleyan family is that the mission of the church is God's mission to the world, rather than vice versa."<sup>8</sup> In this respect mission becomes something that the church does separately from its ecclesiology. Wesleyans assert that participation in the liturgy is participation in the church through the paschal mystery of Christ's dying and rising, by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

It is encouraging that recent liturgical reforms are taking place in the Wesleyan tradition that couples mission and ecclesiology.<sup>10</sup> This liturgical reform is an attempt to reform

---

<sup>6</sup> Morris Pelzel, *Ecclesiology: The Church as Communion and Mission*. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>7</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being and Communion*. (Yonkers, New York: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> E. Bryon Anderson. *Common Worship: Tradition, Formation, and Mission* (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2017), 135.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, 135.; See Jason Vickers, ed. *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist: The Presence of God for Christian Life and Ministry*. (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2016).

participation in the Eucharist and God's mission in the world. Could part of this reform be to re-appropriate Wesleyan Eucharistic theology for mission and reconciliation?

### **John Wesley's Eucharistic Theology**

What might we learn from Wesleys regarding an ecclesiology that would guide spiritual growth and renewal for the church today? Are there specific facets that characterize the whole of Wesleyan ecclesiology? While a discussion of Wesley's ecclesiology requires a much larger focus than the scope of this paper, Leclerc and Maddix identify three aspects of Wesley's ecclesiology that help to inform Wesley's Eucharistic theology. First, the church is where God is worshipped, the Word is preached, and the sacraments properly practiced. In Wesley's sermon on the Church, he defines "the church as where the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments duly administered."<sup>11</sup> As an Anglican, Wesley had a very high view of worship and liturgy and believed it was important to practice worship appropriately, which for him always included the Eucharist. Second, the church is a gathering where the people are present to each other. The church is a healing community, a place of kindness, acceptance, and forgiveness. All parts of the body of Christ are valued and play a significant role in the church. Members of the body of Christ are to be present to each other through worship, fellowship, and small groups. Wesley's focus on the horizontal dimension of spiritual formation is best expressed through his societies, classes, and bands---channels of grace for mutual accountability and spiritual growth. Third, the church is missionally engaged in the world, offering hospitality, justice, liberation, and the proclamation of the kingdom of God.

---

<sup>11</sup> John Wesley, "An Earnest Appeal to Mean of Reason and Religion," ed. Albert Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., Vol. 11, gen. eds. Richard P Heitzenrater and Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975-995, 11:77.

In summary, the body of Christ is nurtured and strengthened by participating in means of grace and by being present to each other, both of which empower Christians to live out God's mission in the world—to participate with God in the renewal of all of creation.<sup>12</sup> The goal of Wesley's ecclesiology is that Christians be transformed into the image and likeness of Christ through participation in the means of grace. Thus, the renewal of all of creation.

Central to Wesley's ecclesiology is his practice and advocacy of the Eucharistic grace, which provides the central sacramental emphasis of his "means of grace." Wesley states,

"By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of god, and appointed for this end—to be the *ordinary* channels whereby he conveys to men [and women], preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."<sup>13</sup>

Wesley sometimes substitutes the term "ordinances," (ordained of God) for "means of grace" during his controversy with Moravians over the Fetter Lane society. This controversy resulted in Wesley's instruction to ministers regarding various practices for Godly living. In his Larger minutes of 1778 he uses the language of instituted means (prayer, searching the scriptures, the Lord's Supper, fasting and Christian conferencing). The prudential means included particular rules, arts of holy living, acts of ministry and larger attitude toward daily living listed under the headings of watching, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and exercising the presence of God.<sup>14</sup> Wesley's practice and advocacy of the Eucharist grace provide the central sacramental emphasis of all these practices.

---

<sup>12</sup> Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix. *Essential Church: A Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012), 17-19.

<sup>13</sup> John Wesley, "The means of grace," ed. Albert Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., Vol. 15, gen. eds. Richard P Heitzenrater and Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975-'995, 1:381.

<sup>14</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 13: 322.

Wesley's theology and practice is anchored in the sacrament of the Lord's supper and the worship that surrounds it. He regularly participated in the Eucharist and encouraged Methodist followers to do the same. He expected Methodists to attend to the Eucharistic service weekly because for Wesley this was integral to holiness and the mission of the church. The Eucharist, according to Wesley, served as a "channel of grace" that formed and transformed persons.

In Wesley's sermon on *The Duty of Constant Communion*, he asks why Christians should participate in communion on a regular basis. He responds by saying we are to participate in communion as much as possible because Christ commanded us, "*do this in remembrance of me*" (Luke 22:19). The benefits of communion are includes reconciliation to God and others and the strengthening and refreshing of our souls. Wesley states, "The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins by enabling us to leave them. As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls: this give strength to perform our duty, and lead us on to perfection."<sup>15</sup> Wesley's view of constant communion served two primary purposes: as a means of grace for forgiveness of sin, and as means of grace to strengthen us to work. As long as sin remains in a believer growing toward holiness, her or his life will likely reflect some struggle. The Lord's Supper strengthens us to prevail in the struggle. In addition, not only does the Lord's supper enable the community to remember the past events of the cross and Christ's redemptive work for all, it celebrates the presence of the living Lord in a feast of thanksgiving and orients the community in hope toward the consummation of all things in the great heavenly banquet to come.

---

<sup>15</sup> Wesley *Works*, 3: 429.

Wesley had a high view of specific liturgical practices and expected people to participate in worship. Wesley, an Anglican, followed the *Book of Common Prayer* as the primary resource for his Eucharistic liturgy. Wesley continued to support the *BCP* by encouraging Methodists not to be perceived as a nonconformist sect by diverging greatly from the Church of England's liturgy. The *BCP*, created for Anglicans, indicates a particular theological understanding of the Eucharist as the "real presence" of Christ. The theological view that Christ's "real presence" is in the Eucharist is reflected in Wesley's Eucharistic theology. Wesley's Eucharistic theology is deeply intertwined with the Anglicans constructions and debates over the sacrament and accompanying liturgies.<sup>16</sup>

Geordan Hammond indicates that Wesley was influenced by the sacramental theology of the Non-Jurors<sup>17</sup> and Daniel Brevint.<sup>18</sup> In Brevint's *Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice*,<sup>19</sup> he focuses on the concept of the mysterious presence of Christ in the Eucharist through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Wesley accepted this position of the Eucharist before the beginning of the revival of 1738 and continued throughout the revival.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Eucharist was an ongoing influence during the revival. Hammond comments by stating, "that the Wesleys led a revival that was liturgical and evangelical."<sup>21</sup> Also, Hammond indicates that while Wesley later dropped some of the practices applied in Georgia, his overall Eucharistic theology does not undergo

---

<sup>16</sup>Dean Blevins, Practicing the New Creation: Wesley's Eschatological Community formed by the means of grace. *Asbury Theology Journal*, 58 (2), 2003, 90.

<sup>17</sup> The non-Jurors were a group of prominent bishops and priests who had opposed the Catholicism of James II, but then refused to sign an oath of allegiance to William and Mary because they understand this to contradict the oath that they had already made to James. The non-Jurors advocated a primitivism that looked to the early church as the model for sacramental theology and practice, which put them at odds with the church.

<sup>18</sup> Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 64.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Brevint, *Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice* (London, 1673).

<sup>20</sup> Hammond, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Hammond, 63.

significant change later in his life.<sup>22</sup> For Wesley the continual participation in the Lord's Supper as a means of grace was essential to the mission of the movement in order for persons to be reconciled to God and to each other.

### **John Wesley's Eucharistic Theology, Post 1738**

His fellow "Sacramentarian" John Clayton influenced Wesley's Eucharistic practices during his ministry in Georgia and the strict Non-Juror approach included the investigation into a person's spiritual disciplines. Wesley's revisions of the Eucharistic liturgy of the *BCP* and introduction of weekly communion was a success and his parish grew.<sup>23</sup> While in Savannah, Wesley's requirement that those wanting to participate in communion must sign up beforehand became problematic on one ill-fated Sunday in August of 1737 when a certain young woman named Sophia Williamson failed to sign up to participation in communion but approached the table anyway. As is discussed later, his fencing of the table in Georgia is replaced with open communion to all willing to receive during the Methodist revival, so that all were expected to participate fully in the liturgy.

Wesley also begins to abandon a stricter observance of the Eucharist, or "fencing of the table," during this controversy with Moravians at the Fetter Lane society.<sup>24</sup> Wesley records in his journal that according to the Moravians since many people doubted their faith they should enter into "stillness," refraining from participating in any of the means of grace, especially the Lord's Supper, until God gave them assurance. Philip Henry Molther's doctrine of "stillness" gave focus to faith in Christ alone and that assurance of faith came not by good works. What Wesley

---

<sup>22</sup> Hammond, 64-65.

<sup>23</sup> Hammond, 37-41; See Mark Mann, Wesley, Word, and Table: The rise and fall of Eucharistic Practice in Early Methodism, *Wesley Theological Journal*, 51:2 (Fall 2016), 54-67.

<sup>24</sup> David Rainey, The future of Wesleyan Theology with a Missional Agenda; Reconciliation and the Eucharist, *Didache: Faith Teaching* 13:2 (Winter 2014), 4.



had learned from his encounter with the Moravians was that believers are justified and assured of their salvation only by the grace of God given through faith. He was disturbed by the Moravians view that the ordinary means of grace could be construed as forms of works righteousness. The Moravians had such an aversion to any forms of “works” and advocated quietly waiting for direct assurance of salvation, rejected the notion that there are any practices through which grace may be mediated, including the sacraments. This was counter to Wesley’s view of the means of grace and particularly the Lord’s Supper. Therefore, Wesley struggled over this issue with the Moravians for two years, which ultimately led him to part ways with his Moravian friends.

Wesley’s abandonment of more strict observance of communion at the Fetter Lane Society is a significant shift in his practice of communion. This shift is also connected to his view of the Table as a converting ordinance. In 1740, in his sermon on *The Means of Grace*, Wesley states, “the Lord’s Supper was ordained by God, to be a means of conveying to men [and women] either preventing, or justifying, or sanctifying grace.”<sup>25</sup> Wesley’s theological view of the Lord’s Supper as a converting ordinance was a move from his earlier position, namely that a person needed to prepare to be worthy to partake. He instead held that “no fitness is required at the time of communicating but a sense of our state, or our utter sinfulness and helplessness; everyone knows he or she is fit for hell being just fit to come to Christ.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the only preparation is the desire to receive the grace that God offers in this meal. During the Methodist revival, communion was open to all who are willing to receive and full participation in the liturgy was expected. By opening the Table to sinners rather than restricting it to believers, Wesley embraced the idea that the grace offered in the Lord’s Supper was reconciliatory for the participant, a view which was consistent with his mission to see souls saved.

---

<sup>25</sup> Wesley *Works*, 16 : 381.

<sup>26</sup> Wesley *Works*, 19: 159

Rainey argues that thousands of people attended Wesley's Eucharistic services while he was preaching throughout Great Britain.<sup>27</sup> Wesley's journals indicate that Methodists began to celebrate the Lord's supper outside of the church in halls, chapels, and outdoor services.<sup>28</sup> Wesley was criticized by Anglican leaders for encouraging Methodists to participate in communion outside the church. They claimed he was starting an alternative church---something that Wesley denied throughout his ministry.

Wesley's evangelistic efforts of preaching were linked to participation in the Eucharist. Wesley's preaching and the celebration of the Eucharist provided the seeker with grace to be awakened by the Spirit.<sup>29</sup> For Wesley both the preaching and the celebration of the Eucharist among Methodists was intended to reform and revitalize the Church of England. While the coupling of preaching and the celebration of the Eucharist was part of the revival movement, Wesley continued to encourage Methodists to attend first their local parish to receive communion. In essence, regular Sunday services of Word and Table were the expected norm in the early decades of Methodism.

Both the changes at the Fetter Lane controversy and a revival movement that combined preaching and the open table provide examples of Wesley's missional focus of healing and reconciliation.

### **Inclusive or Exclusive?**

After 1738, Wesley had a more open approach to participation in the Lord's supper than in his previous years. American Methodists inherited guidelines for participating in the Lord's Supper. In Wesley's Larger minutes of 1738, he expressed two primary concerns in

---

<sup>27</sup> Rainey, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Wesley, *Works* 19:472. Wesley denies extra-ecclesial Eucharistic practice in a 1739 journal entry, but then in 1745 describes this practice as if it had been happening awhile. *Works* 20:111.

<sup>29</sup> Jack Jackson, *Offering Christ: John Wesley's Evangelistic Vision*. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2017), 57.

administering the Lord's Supper that impact relationships with other Christians and their communities.<sup>30</sup> The first concern pertained to the posture for receiving the sacrament, with kneeling recommended, but standing or sitting was permitted if the person had scruples. The second concern was focused on who had access to the Table. Active and sincere members were qualified to commune. Communicants in other denominations could be members of the Methodist society contingent upon their willingness to obey the Methodists' rules, and membership was open to other Christians in good standing.<sup>31</sup> Persons who were not members could be admitted if they possessed a "Sacrament-Ticket." Therefore, there was significant scrutiny about moral behavior and spiritual keenness prior to admission to the Table, but no mention of a baptismal prerequisite.<sup>32</sup> American Methodist were pressured by other Christian groups, such as Baptists, to require baptism as a requirement for participation in communion.

While baptism was not required for participation in communion, there is no evidence that Wesley ever knowingly served communion to an unbaptized person, but he probably did open the table to those who were not confirmed if they could meet the conditions of the invitation:

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to almighty God.<sup>33</sup>

The invitation to the table does not say anything about baptism, but since it was borrowed from the *BCP*, it assumed that Anglicans would be baptized as infants. The lack of clarity on this issue

---

<sup>30</sup> Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, Eucharist and Ecumenism, In Jason Vickers, ed. *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist: The Presence of God for Christian Life and Ministry*. (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2016), 278.

<sup>31</sup> Tucker, 279.

<sup>32</sup> Tucker, 279.

<sup>33</sup> The Archbishops' Council. *The Book of Common Prayer*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 274-75.

from Wesley has resulted in confusion as to whether his Eucharistic theology is inclusive or exclusive, particularly when it comes to current Eucharistic practices in the church today.<sup>34</sup>

### **American Methodists and the Eucharist**

As Methodism began to spread in America under the leadership of Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, its first co-superintendents, there was an institutional transition from Anglicanism into an independent church.<sup>35</sup> The practice of communion continued to decline partially because Asbury was “never persuaded by Wesley’s call for constant communion and did not celebrate it frequently himself.”<sup>36</sup> In addition, many of the clergy did not have an Anglican background and Asbury did not want to form a rift in the movement, so for many congregants constant communion was not emphasized.

One of Wesley’s most significant shifts from the Church of England was the ordination of clergy to administer the sacraments. Ellen Heath argues that “Wesley was unauthorized to appoint or ordain anyone, yet he did because it became a missional imperative. This is how Methodist began.”<sup>37</sup> For Wesley, it was more important for new Christians to be baptized and have access to the Lord’s Supper than to follow the established tradition of the Anglican church. Heath argues that what Wesley models is an argument to move away from ordained clergy, as a means of power, to allow laity to lead communion.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup>See Brent D. Peterson, *Created to Worship: God’s Invitation to Become Fully Human*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012.); E. Bryon Anderson. *Common Worship: Tradition, Formation, and Mission* (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2017); Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, Eucharist and Ecumenism, In Jason Vickers, ed. *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist: The Presence of God for Christian Life and Ministry*. (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2016), 273-290.

<sup>35</sup> Maddox, 135.

<sup>36</sup>James N. Fitzgerald. *Weaving a Rope of Sand: The Separation of the Proclamation of the Word and the celebrate of the Eucharist in the Church of the Nazarene* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), 96.

<sup>37</sup> Elaine A. Heath, Eucharist and Evangelism, In Jason Vickers, ed. *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist: The Presence of God for Christian Life and Ministry*. (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2016), 178.

<sup>38</sup> Heath, 167.

Wesley's commitment to regular participation in the Eucharist is reflected in the development of the *Sunday Service*, an edited version of the *Book of Common Prayer*. The revisions were primarily to accommodate the special circumstances of the new American churches' social context, which included extemporary prayer as well as John and Charles Wesley's hymns.<sup>39</sup> However, the American church barely used this resource. The rugged frontier with its focus on freedom from the established church and illiteracy made liturgical worship less suitable in early America. The new people of God set free from the bondage of the Anglican tradition were to recover the pristine and primitive vision of the church. The result was that the American Methodists did not practice Wesley's weekly participation in the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. Wesley longed that American followers be nourished frequently through the Lord's table. The result was communion became more of a duty than a means of grace through its infrequency—usually only at quarterly conference.<sup>40</sup> By 1792, the *Sunday Service* was stripped down from 314 to 37 pages, and became somewhat marginal in the *Discipline*.<sup>41</sup> Other reasons weekly communion was limited were the lack of priests to celebrate the Lord's Supper and the influence of preaching at the society worship meetings. Whenever American Methodists had to choose between formality and the free expression of the heart, they nearly always chose the latter.<sup>42</sup>

While American Methodists faltered in following Wesley's view of "constant communion" through weekly Eucharistic practice, they did however become a counter-cultural

---

<sup>39</sup>Dean G. Blevins, Practicing the New Creation: Wesley's eschatological community formed by the means of grace. *Asbury Theology Journal*, Fall/Spring 2002-2003, 2:1, 90.

<sup>40</sup>Maddox, 137. Maddox indicates that this continues through the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Part of the disdain for liturgy through this period was surely due to a strong anti-Roman Catholic sentiment that Methodists shared with nineteenth-century American Protestantism in general. Wesley's hymns began to be replaced with gospel songs in Methodist worship. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Eucharist fared better through the standard Methodist quarterly celebration. More frequent communion was in the Southern church with their move to a monthly celebration.

<sup>41</sup> Mann, 63.

<sup>42</sup>See Lester Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality: A Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

movement within a more dominant culture of the elite of society. As Maddox indicates, “while hardly a thoroughly egalitarian community, early Methodism’s theology and worship practices provide affirmation of worth and possibilities of involvement that were denied women, slaves and the poor in the larger society.”<sup>43</sup> This inclusion of the marginalized of society, particularly when it comes to participation in the Eucharist, reflects Wesley’s commitment to the missional and reconciliatory aspects of the Eucharist. As the Methodist movement developed, Wesley’s missional focus was to include all people in the renewal of a nation.

However, the frequency of Eucharistic practice and use of the *SSM* would diminish in America, and the close relationship between preaching and the Eucharist that Wesley had worked so hard to forge would begin to unwind almost immediately after his death.<sup>44</sup>

### **Implications for Eucharistic Practice**

What can the church today learn from Wesley’s Eucharistic theology and mission? As indicated in this paper, one could argue that Wesley never allowed participation in communion to anyone who had not been baptized, especially since infant baptism was the norm in England. On the other hand, one could argue that Wesley’s change regarding the Eucharist at the Fetter Lane controversy and during the revival movement was to remove the “fencing” requirements of the table.

One aspect of the liturgy of the Eucharist is particularly important in considering the reconciling aspects of the liturgy. In the liturgy of the Eucharist, congregants are invited to pass the peace of Christ. While the passing of the peace is not included in 18<sup>th</sup> century liturgy, but

---

<sup>43</sup> Rand Maddox. *Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism*. In Tim Macquiban, ed. *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu* (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 135.

<sup>44</sup> Mann, 63.

was added in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “passing of the peace” made explicit what was implicit in the liturgy. The “passing of the peace” is not about welcoming to the church or the table; it is an act of reconciliation. When we “pass the peace” it is a direct statement that the church is a place of reconciliation. The “passing of the peace” is a visible sign that God’s people are a people of reconciliation, and this visibility conveys mission to the world. In other words, sharing in the peace of the Eucharist, we learn the habit of living in a state of reconciliation with God and others and sharing in a common mission and commitment.<sup>45</sup>

While American Methodism gradually moved away from Wesley’s view of “constant communion” to a more preaching-centered approach to worship---something that is inherit in much of the Wesleyan tradition today---the hope is that a re-appropriation of Wesley’s Eucharistic theology will provide pastors and church leaders with a practice that can bring church and mission together. As congregations “pass the peace of Christ” in the Lord’s Supper, an open table that is inclusive of all persons, they declare that the church is a reconciled community. In addition, this declaration has eschatological implications. Wesley’s affirmation that the Lord’s table is a “converting ordinance” means it is open to persons who come penitently seeking healing and God offers healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Wesley believed that the Lord’s Supper could be the occasion of a person’s faith response and conversion by seeking God’s forgiveness. Wesley’s Eucharistic theology of an open table stretches across borders to invite the least, lost, and lonely of society to be awakened by the Spirit and provides healing and renewal in the new creation.

---

<sup>45</sup> Rainey, 11.

## ***Methodist Renewal: A Way Forward***

One of the ways in which the broader Methodist movement can engage in mission and reconciliation is by appropriating Wesley's Eucharistic theology as a means of spiritual healing, renewal, mission, and reconciliation. As I have argued, the mission of the church is reflected in the church's participation in the broken body and shed blood of Christ. Mission and reconciliation of all things are central to the Table as the people of God encounter the presence of Christ that heals, restores, and reconciles persons to God and others.

Given a Wesleyan Eucharistic theology, the following practical suggestions are provided as a way forward for the broader Methodist movement to engage in mission and reconciliation:

- 1. Reclaiming Weekly Eucharist:* It is not surprising that mission and reconciliation would begin with the Eucharist given the focus of this paper. Reclaiming weekly communion in the broader Wesleyan tradition does not mean a particular ritual, such as the Great Thanksgiving, has to be followed, but that congregations find imaginative ways to incorporate the Eucharist into their particular context. The reclaiming requires education on the theology of the Eucharist and the reasons for weekly participation.
- 2. Table as Inclusive:* While Wesley's original intent was that participants be baptized, the later practices indicate an open table as a means of mission and reconciliation. Given Wesley's emphasis on the table as a converting ordinance, persons who are seeking after God can receive forgiveness and reconciliation. An open table can be a place of hospitality and acceptance of all persons regardless of their life situation. This is particularly important for persons who view the church as exclusive and unwelcoming. An open table can help to cross borders of ethnicity, sexuality, and cultural contexts. The Church of the Nazarene does not support an open table because it states that those who



participate are “all those who are truly repentant, forsaking their sins, and believing in Christ for salvation are invited to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. We come to the table that we may be renewed in life and salvation and be made one by the Spirit.”<sup>46</sup> While some pastors in the Church of the Nazarene have viewed this in a positive light by focusing on the table as a converting ordinance, many still view this as a “fencing” of the table. It is at this point that Wesley’s Eucharistic theology and the statement of the Church of the Nazarene are inconsistent, which has implications for the practice for pastors who want to hold to Wesley’s approach that is more inclusive.

*3. Table as Mission and Reconciliation.* Participation in the Table becomes a means of God’s grace to empower congregants to experience the presence of Christ by “breathing in” and then “breathing out” into the world as the poured out and broken body of Christ. Congregants not only receive healing and renewal at the table, but engage in reconciling all of creation as they live out mission in world. As the church encounters the renewing love of God in the Eucharist, it is transformed to proclaim hope and forgiveness and to be God’s poured out body and blood to the world. God shapes believers into a community of those who are broken so they can share their lives freely and in the suffering of Christ. The Table also provides a means of forgiveness and reconciliation. Wesley believed that a person may receive forgiveness and reconciliation through an obedient response to God’s grace through participation in the Eucharist. He believed that something divine takes place when a person comes with an open heart to receive the life-giving gift of the bread and cup as the Word of God.

---

<sup>46</sup> Dean G. Blevins, et. al, eds. *Church of the Nazarene Manual: 2017-2021*. (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House), 2017.

4. *Table as Formation.* Through participation in the Eucharistic practice, by God's grace, a person's interior life, their attitudes and dispositions, are transformed into holy character. As we cooperate with God, our affections become tempers over time as we attend to the means of grace. It is out of the tempers or habits that our actions develop. We then continue to live out of these inclinations in the form of holy love. By God's grace, the Eucharist is food for the soul and provides spiritual nourishment. As persons participate in the meal, they acknowledge their hunger and need of God's grace and the meal provides nourishment for the hungry. Wesley believed that the Eucharistic feast "our every want supplies." The Eucharist also conforms believers to the image of Christ. Participation in the Eucharist as a "means of grace" helps believers move toward the restoration of the image of God, the *telos* of perfect love---the heart of Wesley's theology. In other words, through our participation in the means of grace we become who we were created to be. Thanks be to God.