GOD AT WORK IN THE "10/40 WINDOW:"
to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit

As John Wesley matured in his theology he emphasized more and more the universal work of the gospel. Since he believed in the prevenient work of the Spirit he insisted that Methodists be fully aware of what God was doing in other parts of the world. This had several significant implications.

THE GOSPEL AS WORLD AFFIRMING.

Wesley believed that Christianity is, or should be, different in its basic approach to life and creation. There is much in the world of religion that is world denying. It tends to imply dualism—a good God and an evil god. The good God dwells within us, while the evil god (perhaps some neoplatonic demiurge) creates the universe and the world in which we live. Since (according to some) creation is evil, salvation calls us out of the world (let the world go hang) by contemplating the God within, that we might be absorbed into some kind of cosmic fluff.

Christianity, on the other hand, at its best, is world affirming. Although some forms of Christianity insist that happiness in this world is only an illusion, Wesley believed that the same God whose Spirit dwells within us is the One God who creates and, in spite of the
fact that creation has fallen, God wants it back for our enjoyment. Wesley insisted,

Evil did not exist at all in the original nature of things. It was no more the necessary result of matter, than it was the necessary result of spirit. All things then, without exception, were very good. And how would it be otherwise? There was no defect at all in the power of God, any more than in his goodness or wisdom (Works, 3rd ed., vol. 6, p. 214).

Creation is far more important to God than to the ruler of this world (I Jn. 5:19).

In less than six months after beginning to teach at the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism on the campus of Asbury Theological Seminary, several of my colleagues helped me to see that Christians have conceded far too much to worldwide anti-Christian influences. For example, the evangelistic emphasis on the so-called "10/40 Window" (those European, African and Asian countries that lie between the 10th and 40th parallels) assumes Satan's control of great masses of people with little or no thought to the prevenient work of the Holy Spirit already at work. Although I would be the first to admit that the "10/40" attempt to establish a prayer base upon which to begin evangelistic ministries is noble, I am reminded again and again that God has more invested in creation than we do. God is already at work and if we can find the tools to communicate the gospel effectively, then God might well let us in on the fun of winning this world to Christ. Let me illustrate from the works of Wesley.

Soon after his "Aldersgate" experience Wesley preached a sermon entitled, "The Almost Christian" (Works, 3rd ed., vol. 5,
pp.17-25). In that sermon he spoke about the faith of the "almost Christian" and the faith of the "altogether Christian." There, the faith of the almost Christian implied a "heathen honesty" which paid at least some regard to truth and justice that expressed itself in love and offered assistance one to another. It also implied a "form of godliness" that abstained from excess and avoided all strife and contention. The almost Christian frequently prayed and was sincere toward inward principles of religion extending even to a real design to do the will of God. Unfortunately, according to the earlier Wesley, since the almost Christian lacked the one thing necessary evident in the altogether Christian—the faith that follows repentance and offers the forgiveness of sins—all of this, though noble when enlivened by believing in the Son who brings everlasting life, served only to compound one's condemnation.

Over a quarter of a century later Wesley wrote another sermon entitled, "On Faith" (Works, 3rd ed., vol. 7, pp. 195-202). In this sermon he contrasted the faith of a "servant" with the faith of a "child." Here the faith of the servant is directly analogous to the faith of the "almost Christian" referred to in his earlier sermon. Now, however, the faith of the servant, rather than serving only to compound one's condemnation, means that one is not far from the kingdom of God.

Like the "10/40 Window" the "Almost Christian" sermon concedes too much to the Enemy (the "Accuser"), whereas the later sermon, "On Faith" acknowledges the influence of the Holy Spirit already at work in the world. Once John Wesley recognized that evangelism is bearing witness to a God already at work, ministry
became less of a chore and more of an opportunity. God is not left without a witness in the world, "Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuit prius in sensu" (Nothing is in the understanding, which was not first perceived by some of the senses). His Works demonstrate this, time and again. In his sermon, "Walking by Sight and by Faith," he writes of those in the "unknown regions" of the world:

God, having "opened the eyes of their understanding," pours divine light into their soul; whereby they are enabled to "see Him that is invisible," to see God and the things of God. What their "eye had not seen, nor their ear heard, neither had it entered into their heart to conceive," God from time to time reveals to them by the "unction of the Holy One, which teacheth them of all things" (Works, 3rd ed., vol. 7, p. 260).

Since God has taken the initiative by the "unction of the Holy One," we can be bold in our follow-up. We need not be intimidated. Understandably, Wesley became more and more sensitive to cross-cultural issues that would further the gospel. Let me put this a different way.

THE UNIVERSAL WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

I assume that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone, the world over. That, linked with the need to be culturally sensitive in order to cooperate with the work of the Spirit, is the rationale for this paper. As strange as this may sound, if God loves some people more than others, I'm not sure I want to go to heaven. If God is no respecter of persons, then admittedly the Holy Spirit must somehow take up the slack, level the playing field. Forgive my presumption, but since I believe that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way, then God, by the Holy Spirit, must guarantee that every
man, woman, and child has an equal opportunity to respond, if not to the name, at least to the person of Jesus Christ. How can that be? How can one respond to the person of Jesus Christ without knowing his name?

It occurs to me that knowing someone is far more than knowing their name. Again, early in his ministry, Wesley condemned the mystics because they did not specifically call people to faith in Jesus Christ. These mystics were the "rock upon which he nearly made shipwreck." Of all the enemies of revival they were the worst because they stabbed Christianity in the vitals, making a mockery of personal faith in Jesus Christ. Later in his ministry, however, Wesley used the example of several mystical lives to illustrate Christian perfection. Obviously, you cannot have it both ways. So, what happened to change his mind? As he matured in his theology, Wesley began to rely more and more on the fruit of the Spirit as the criterion for faith (Gal. 5:22). His conclusion? Even if it looked like a grape vine, if it produced apples, call it an apple tree. So, if the mystical lives manifested fruit that only faith could produce then faith must be present, even without acknowledging it.

Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he [or she] who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21). Obviously I can know someone's person without knowing their name. I have gone to remote parts of the world and among those open to the Holy Spirit already at work within them, spoken the name of Jesus with this response, "So that's his name." Jesus says to his disciples, "Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me" (Jn.
Furthermore, "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things. The Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me; he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment; he will guide you into all truth" (Jn. 14:25; 15:26; 16:8,13). I am absolutely convinced that those who remain open to the Spirit, a personal relationship with God will lead inevitably to faith in the person of Jesus Christ, and, if his name is spoken, a recognition of that name will confirm their experience. Now, lest you think I’ve lost my "evangelical mind," let me offer a brief disclaimer.

THE DISCLAIMER.

The disclaimer is that none of this should imply universalism. I do not for a moment believe that all religions are the same. Admittedly, most attempts at finding a universal gospel look for the answers in other religions--what do Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam already share in common with Christianity. For me that is the wrong point of departure since all religions are a "law of sin and death" apart from the power of the Holy Spirit available through faith in Jesus Christ. Let me illustrate.

Some years ago I met a young man in the sauna of a university health center. He was a Muslim from Sri Lanka. After a brief time of chatter I decided to ask a straightforward question, "Have you ever considered Christianity?"

He smiled, "No, why should I?"

He seemed genuinely interested so I asked, "What do you do for a living?" He was an engineer and for some reason, I then asked,
"What do you do when you've got a 50 ton block of concrete? How do you move it?"

His immediate response, "You've got to have a hoist."

My next comment, "Let me tell you about the hoist," opened the door for some interesting conversation. Over the next few minutes I began in a very introductory way to share with him my own conviction that every religion the world over (including my own) was like a fifty ton block of concrete without the power of the Holy Spirit available through faith in Jesus Christ. As I left the sauna I lifted my arm like a hoist--"Don't forget the hoist." The next week he noticed me across a crowded room, smiled, and lifted his hand mimicking a hoist. We have had several interesting conversations since.

So, let's be honest. I believe that Christianity picks up where every other religion leaves off. That, however, does not make me right and the rest of the world wrong. Over the years students have asked, "How can you be so narrow minded as to assume the uniqueness of faith in Jesus Christ?" My response, "My believing in the uniqueness of faith in Jesus Christ doesn't make me right, but it sure makes me an evangelist."

If God is a Triangle and I believe God is a Circle, God does not become a Circle to accommodate what I believe God to be. God remains a Triangle. Truth has never changed to accommodate what I believe truth to be. Nevertheless, I believe that it is Jesus Christ alone that puts us right with God, heals the brokenness of our time, and makes us fit to share the heritage of God's glory. If you can convince me that Jesus is not who he said he was and is, I am a dead
man. Flesh would not cling to bone any longer. You could gather me up in a basket. That's just how much of me is at stake.

FOLLOWING UP ON GOD'S INITIATIVE, A CULTURAL MANDATE.

If God has already taken the initiative in the drama of rescue, even within the 10/40 window, then an intelligent, winsome witness should bring results. Again, we should not be intimidated. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (II Kings 6:16). This does not mean that we abuse another's culture. Culture is our friend, not our enemy. Within every culture there should be clues as to where God is already at work. Look at the stories, myths, symbols, rituals, and especially the music and art of any culture. Those countries within the 10/40 window are rich with traditions that are packed with transferable concepts that will communicate the gospel. There are some wonderful Biblical precedents.

God in the Creation account (Gen. 1-11) does not run roughshod over culture. Biblical scholars tell us that there were contemporary myths that were similar in some respects to the Genesis account of creation. Some see this as a threat to the integrity of the Old Testament. Let me give this a different twist. God wanted to communicate the truth of a Divine purpose and (it is suggested) used some of the existing stories from Mesopotamia as transferable concepts to reveal a universal truth. People in the days of Moses knew and supposedly understood these stories. God does not start from scratch. The bits and pieces of reality in the existing myths are cleaned up, sanctified, and woven into a narrative that people could understand. Although the difference between Creation as the result of the one God, loving (the Genesis account), and the many gods,
warring (the Mesopotamia account), is significant, the overall story is communicated in such a way that people could relate and understand. Again, the existing culture (rather than a threat) is used as a springboard for communicating Divine revelation. Is God smart or what? Another example, however, takes this same concept to still another level.

Within generations of Adam and Eve, God regretted having created our first forebears. It is a bit of an understatement to be reminded that the flood seriously pruned the family tree. Unfortunately, it is a short journey from Noah to Babel. Humankind, still sin prone, once again yielded to inherent desire. God knew that humankind, in community, left to itself, would have perfected its own evil and destroyed itself. There is nothing we cannot do in community. Unredeemed, we would have perfected our self-centeredness and devoured ourselves. Perhaps God separated us at Babel to prevent our self-destruction. The confusion of languages served to preserve a remnant that could understand the reality of only one God. It has recently occurred to me that Babel, the last paragraph of primeval history (Gen. 11:8,9), mandates the study of different cultures. We need not return to Babel, but we must find ways of communicating across cultural boundaries. In fact, the first paragraph of patriarchal history, the covenant established between God and Abraham (Gen. 11:10ff), demonstrates the principle. In effect, the last of primeval history sets the stage for cross-cultural studies.

The story of Abraham is another example where God (and the author of the Pentateuch) uses existing culture to communicate the
truth. I've had students complain that the covenant with Abraham makes God too bloodthirsty. My response is usually, "God didn't invent the concept of covenant. That was already in place when God chose to be revealed."

How did you establish relationship in Abraham's day? You "cut a covenant." God's use of the covenant is God's way of being culturally sensitive. God related to Abraham in a way that Abraham could understand. The animal was sacrificed and the two parties of the covenant, Abraham and God (God being symbolized by the fire pot), passed between the halves of the divided animal with the promise that if either broke the promise, the same fate would befall them. There were even provisions for covenant renewal. Feast days were established where animal sacrifices—as signs of repentance—underscored the seriousness of sin. Unfortunately, after several generations, these acts of sacrifice degenerated into a form of religion that no longer demonstrated the heart. God wearied, once again, but had promised never again to destroy or confuse creation. In God's infinite mercy a new covenant was established where God provided a complete and perfect sacrifice that would take away the sins of the world, once and for all. Nestled in the middle of the longest book in the Bible we find these words:

"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord....
"No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will know me, from the least of them to the greatest,. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31:31-34).

I Peter 1:17-21 states that "the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect... was chosen before the creation of the world." The implication here is clear. God took the cultural concept of covenant seriously. From the beginning God knew full well that the very act of Creation itself would eventually require the blood of an only Son. It is terribly significant that God was a Redeemer before God was a Creator. God loved before God made. Even though the covenant with God was broken, time and again, God established a guarantee that our brokenness would no longer rule and that our sins would be remembered no more. In line with the theme for this Institute, that is the story of the work of a Truine God.

TO THE FATHER, THROUGH THE SON, BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.

The Bible teaches that God has one essence (the Shema in Deut. 6:4 reads, "the Lord our God is one God") but is manifested in three distinct persons--"Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19). There is no analogy that can adequately explain this (I am told that heresy is born when little minds try to solve big paradoxes). For years I used the example of water as liquid, ice, and steam. Water, whether heated or frozen, is still H2O. This was more helpful for some than for others. So, I continued to search for a way of describing the Triune God anticipating the Fall of creation and its ultimate redemption.
Then, late one night, I caught an image. As I was studying the earlier chapters in the book of Genesis, I imagined the three persons of the Trinity discussing the dilemma of creation. Like someone with multiple personalities, I watched and listened as they talked among themselves. That part of God that we call Father was the first to speak, "We want to be known. We will create man and woman 'in our own image' (Gen. 1:26), and we will love them like children." The Son replied, "Will they love us back?" Then, like wind blowing in the trees, I heard the voice of the Spirit, "As we become known, some of them will love us back, because we will be merciful and kind. In spite of their rebellion, our compassion will lead them to repentance and faith."

Then, as they continued to contemplate Creation and the Fall, their voices dropped. There was a catch. It became painfully apparent that in order to be known fully and to guarantee salvation, one of them would have to "visit and redeem the people" (Lk.1:68). One of them would have to "become flesh and dwell among them" (Jn. 1:14). Consistent with the nature of covenant, a sacrifice would be required, since "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). Furthermore, this sacrifice would have to be human and "without blemish" (Heb. 10:1-4). Since all of creation would "sin and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), only the one sent could fulfill such a sacrifice.

Suddenly, I imagined the Son stepping forward to be chosen by the Father as the one who would go (I Pt. 1:20). He spoke, "Send me. 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises' (Heb. 2:12). I will 'share in
their humanity so that by my death I might destroy him who will hold the power of death—that is the devil—and free those who all their lives have been held in slavery' (Heb. 2:14-15). Make me 'like them in every respect' so that I might be 'a merciful and faithful high priest' in your service, that I 'might make atonement for the sins of the people.' Then, because I too have suffered and been tempted, I will be able 'to help those who are being tempted' (Heb. 2:17-18). They will know that we love them, not because we imagine how they feel when they hurt inside, but because we know how they feel when they hurt inside, because I have been there.

So, even before God created, it was decided. The price of creation would require the death of the Son. Even though that Son would then be raised from the dead in order to demonstrate God's victory over sin and death (no small thing), it was an incredible price to pay.

Does God's initiative to establish a covenant sacrifice that would guarantee victory over sin and death make God bloodthirsty? I think not! Remember, God did not invent the rites of covenant. Covenant relationship is God's attempt to be culturally sensitive to a concept already in place so that love and forgiveness are communicated in a way that could be understood and received. God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is always taking such initiative, the world over. Here is one more illustration.

I have a close friend named Betty, who tells of an experience in China. As an opportunity for ministry, she and her husband had gone there to teach English as a second language. Over the course of several weeks she had gotten fairly well acquainted with several of
her students. One of these students (we will call her "Hannah," since to use her Chinese name would place her in jeopardy) was especially resistant to the gospel. Although the Temple of Heaven in Beijing might have given her at least some reference to God and the eternal, she would laugh and become argumentative with any reference to the name of Jesus. Among themselves, Betty and her husband began referring to her as "Hardhearted Hannah."

It was Betty's custom to rise early and go to the dining room to pray. On one such occasion she realized that Hannah (who was preparing the tables for breakfast) had been watching. Somewhat to Betty's surprise, Hannah approached her and asked respectfully, "Betty, what are you doing?" Immediately, in spite of Hannah's former resistance, Betty realized that the Holy Spirit was at work. Without apology, she said, "I'm praying." Hannah asked, "What's praying mean?" Betty added, "It is talking to my heavenly Father in Jesus' name." This time Hannah did not resist, but asked further, "What does that mean, talking to your heavenly father in Jesus' name?" Betty then explained, "It's just telling him what I need, asking for forgiveness, and asking for his guidance in everything that I do. He cares about our everyday activities, even my aches and pains. I pray in Jesus' name because faith in Him assures the forgiveness of my sins and that seems to make my prayers more personal and gives them more power. Jesus says in our Bible that 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father and that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me.'" [Jn. 14:9,10]. No doubt, this Bible quotation, along with, "He cares about our everyday activities," must have gotten Hannah's attention. She then asked if Betty would
pray to God, in Jesus' name, to protect her two brothers who were learning to drive a truck, a dangerous occupation in that part of China. Betty promised she would.

The next day, after breakfast, Betty had an impulse. She said to Hannah, "Hannah, I'm in real pain. My back is hurting. Would you pray to God to make my back better?" Hannah said, "I still do not know what prayer is." Once again, Betty explained that praying to God is just like talking to your best friend. Imagine Betty's delight when Hannah bowed her head and prayed, "Hello, God, this is Hannah speaking. You don't know me. I don't even know how to say these words, but please make Betty's back feel better. Please help our American teachers as they help our Chinese teachers to speak English. Help the Chinese teachers with their pronunciation so they can speak and understand the English words. In Jesus' name I pray this prayer. Amen." Smiling, Hannah then asked if that was the correct way to pray. Betty assured her that it was.

The next day, since Betty's back was better and her own brothers were safe, Hannah, quite unsolicited, asked if she could pray again. This time she prayed, "Hello, God, this is Hannah again. Do you remember me? I'm Betty's friend. I spoke to you yesterday about Betty's back. Now I want to talk about her daughter who is having a baby. By the way, are you only a 'western God,' do I have to talk to you in English? Do you understand Chinese? In Jesus' name. Amen." Betty smiled and gave her a hug.

In a few short weeks, simply by remaining open to the Spirit at work within her and talking to God as she would to a friend, Hannah not only learned how to pray (in Chinese as well as in English), but
came to know the person of Jesus Christ and acknowledged his name without further resistance. Hannah and Betty still correspond.

I have no doubt that this encounter was the work of God, leading Hannah "to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit."

Again, put this universal work of the Spirit together with a sensitivity to culture in order to communicate the gospel and one of the key's to communicating the gospel, even within the 10/40 window, should become apparent. Let God arise.