

Book Notes

James L. Schwenk

Catholic Spirit: Wesley, Whitefield, and the Quest for Evangelical Unity in Eighteenth-Century British Methodism

2008. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press

The theological differences between John Wesley and George Whitefield have been exaggerated by both Wesleyan Arminians and Calvinists. Therefore, James L. Schwenk, professor of church history and dean of the chapel at Evangelical Theological Seminary, wants to set the record straight in a book that reminds its readers of the many similarities between the two eighteenth-century evangelicals: both were members of the holy club, both were ordained Anglican priests, both were committed to the spread of the gospel, both played an active role in the evangelical revival, both were steeped in the heritage of Pietism, both emphasized “warm-hearted” religion, both called the Church back to important social ministries, and both believed that God was “the author, initiator, means and director of the entire redemption process. It’s quite a list.

Beyond this, two of the more significant areas in which substantial theological agreement existed between Wesley and Whitefield, areas that have been neglected by some current Wesley scholars, concerned the matters of free grace and the necessity of the new birth. In terms of the former some of the more popular treatments of Wesley’s theology today hardly mention the key ingredient of free grace at all in Wesley’s theology. Instead, they plod along in an utterly synergistic “catholic” or “eastern fathers” paradigm and thereby neglect the significant contribution of the Reformation to Wesley’s theology. This unbalanced and un-conjunctive reading of Wesley’s theology is always a mistake and Schwenk’s work provides a suitable corrective. In terms of the latter issue, that of the new birth, both Wesley and Whitefield underscored the cruciality of the new birth, that is, the qualitative difference that regeneration makes in the lives of believers. This was a subject on which Whitefield “delighted to dwell,” and on which Wesley himself often taught and preached. Indeed, for Wesley the new birth, along with justification and a measure of assurance, were the principal elements of his broader theme of real, true, proper, Scriptural Christianity which he stressed throughout the great eighteenth-century revival.

The reminder of this broad similarity between the life and thought of two of the eighteenth-century's greatest evangelical leaders is not offered by Schwenk to suggest that important differences did not yet remain—for they clearly did. Whitefield, for example, held a view of predestination and election that could only make Wesley wince especially when the former argued that the Church of England gave credence to the Calvinist view in its Seventeenth Article of Religion. Albert Outler, by the way, demonstrated that the “predestinarian interpretation” of the Anglican articles had in fact “been declined by the majority of Anglican divines in the seven decades following the collapse of the Puritan Commonwealth.” At any rate, when Whitefield went on to contend that the imputation of Christ's obedient life was the basis of the believer's sanctification, Wesley likewise expressed disagreement since such a view could easily lead to lawlessness or antinomianism. And this same antinomian concern on the part of Wesley was expressed yet again as Whitefield articulated what he meant by the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. If believers cannot fall from saving grace will they actually be motivated for ongoing holy living?

Sensing the importance of experimental, warm-hearted Christianity, Wesley and Whitefield overcame some of their disagreements in order to continue to foster the revival. In this co-operation Schwenk sees a “paradigm of evangelical ecumenicity.” Others, however, will see a complicated and at times difficult relationship that endured despite the unresolved differences.

Scott Kisker

Mainline or Methodist: Discovering Our Evangelistic Mission

2008. Nashville: *Discipleship Resources*

The United Methodist Church recently celebrated its fortieth anniversary and a new, genuinely prophetic book argues that this church is sick, very sick. Influenced by theological and political trends that date back to the 1960s, the Methodist church has made a shift from qualitatively distinct life-changing evangelism to plodding along, culturally-accommodating nurture, that is, from evangelical experience to general religious experience. Put another way, the structure of the newly formed church (1968) marginalized evangelism and took on a mainline identity with disastrous results.

Selling out to the establishment and broader American culture, the United Methodist church saw little difference between cultivating good citizens and cultivating Christians. When the church became mainline it stopped being Methodist in all but name. Here a leftist political idiom, once again hailing from the 1960s with its divisive identity politics, ruled the day. Scott Kiser,

the author of this jeremiad and professor of evangelism and Wesley studies at Wesley Theological Seminary (and we hope he has tenure!), points out that many of the practices of the Methodist church today are “little more than thinly veiled attempts to manipulate others through marketing techniques.” Indeed, the only thing that mainline churches currently stand for is diversity and inclusion except, of course, when it comes to including articulate conservative evangelicals who are programmatically excluded from many avenues of power in the United Methodist church. Given this easily demonstrated fact, the call of the Methodist church for political and social justice rings hollow. For all practice purposes, the narrative of the gospel, the universal love of God and neighbor, has been displaced by a script of winners and losers, oppressors and oppressed, and we wonder why we are so divided.

Developing a theme that I had explored in my book *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley*, Kisker considers what “real Methodism” might look like if it captured a vision once more of salvation from the tyranny of sin whereby genuine liberty is proclaimed to the captives. Put another way, the missional task of the United Methodist church, from which it has greatly departed, should be to labor to save sinners from the power of sin, bringing “every part of their lives into the love of Christ the king.”

Kisker rightly understands that so great a salvation is a sheer gift from God and therefore can be received *now*, though there is admittedly process both before and after. Again he argues that “sanctification [is] a gift, an experience that one could and should expect to receive in an instant.” This view, then, has all the elements of a careful and balanced judgment that embraces both process and the instantaneous in a way that highlights the gracious activity of God. It is therefore something of a surprise to learn that towards the end of the book Kisker reverts to an utterly synergistic understanding of redemption (apparently neglecting the import of free grace) and maintains that “the very nature of God’s salvation implies that God’s people cooperate with God’s grace every step of the way of salvation.” Such synergism, a part of the “catholic” paradigm, can explain the process of redemption, to be sure, but not its life-changing moments. For that the protestant paradigm of free grace, not co-operant grace, is needed in which the emphasis is not on responding but on *receiving*. More disturbingly Kisker apparently does not realize that understanding redemption utterly in a synergistic way (one half of Wesley’s conjunction of both free and co-operant grace), issues in the kind of accommodating, incremental nurture so typical of the mainline decline from vibrant evangelical experience that he had so rightly inveighed against in the early stages of the book. However, if Kisker in his own account can find ample room for the free grace which was very much a part of John Wesley’s theology, it will not only bring much needed consistency to his argument but also greater force. The call after all to the

United Methodist church today must be to reclaim its evangelical roots and to underscore what the wonderful, potent, and efficacious grace of God can do.

L. Faye Short and Kathryn D. Kiser

Reclaiming the Wesleyan Social Witness: Offering Christ.

2008. Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers

Much evidence exists to demonstrate that the mission of the church as conceived by mainline denominations focuses largely on humanitarian concerns rather than making serious disciples of Jesus Christ. In order to draw attention to this missional disconnect L. Faye Short and Kathryn D. Kiser have written an engaging and prophetic work that is certain to provoke a lively conversation. Laying part of the blame on the social gospel that emphasized the material over the spiritual, these authors affirm both the personal and social dimensions of redemption but then rightly indicate that for John Wesley the salvation of souls was the highest priority of all—a truth that contemporary leaders of the United Methodist church have clearly forgotten.

Part of the problem here, no doubt, is that elements of liberation theology warped theological understanding by failing to grapple seriously with the very need of salvation by the poor themselves. Instead, the poor were invested with a privileged soteriological status directly in relation to their economic condition. And while Wesley recognized that the poor were “victims of some conditions over which they had no control,” as the authors aptly point out, he did not “excuse them from dealing with sin and growing in righteousness.” Instead, Wesley stressed accountability and would therefore likely take issue with the burgeoning “victim mentality” that plays out among mainline leaders today who allow preferential groups to unswervingly blame circumstances, family or the state for their unenviable condition.

Remarkably perceptive in their social and political analysis of the North American context, Short and Kiser lay much of the blame for the current confusion over the mission of the church at the doorstep of the radicals of the 1960s who advocated socialism as a prescription for all human malaise. Indeed, the emphasis by the New Left on the “sinful structures” of society has undermined the witness of the church for it moved whole populations “from a place of personal responsibility to victimization and from need to entitlement.” For example, not only did many Christian leaders take up the socialist cause in the name of the faith during this period, whereby the vocabulary of the church was redefined, but they also called for a redistribution of wealth and power through coercion, that is, through the unchecked power of the state. And with this new “structural” mentality in place people were

often asked to undertake political and social action without first being invited to the transformation of being that occurs as a consequence of faith in Jesus Christ.

One of the dirty little secrets revealed by Short and Kiser is that though the radical left is often very energetic in *talking* about the poor, evidently their *actions* do not match their words. Thus, not only do evangelicals have more programs that actually help the poor to a better way of life than do mainline leaders, but also conservative families repeatedly give more to charity than do liberal families *within every income class*. This remarkable phenomenon is becoming known as the Joe Biden effect, named after the current Vice-President who though he made around \$800,000 during the three year period from 2004-2006, gave only a little more than a thousand dollars to charity.

In the wake of this ongoing confusion with respect to social, political and theological reasoning, whereby some of the leaders of mainline denominations are very much a part of the problem, having forsaken the narrative of the gospel for a re-worked Marxist one, these two prophetic women call for the sending forth of evangelists who will proclaim nothing less than the good news of the gospel, that grace can liberate all people from the bondage of sin, and that ministry properly understood embraces spirit, soul and body, a balance that is so needed in the days ahead.

Kenneth J. Collins is professor of historical theology and Wesley studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.