
World Evangelization A Wesleyan Proposal

by Leon O. Hynson

For many years students of religion have wrestled with the so-called “scandal of particularity” of Christian faith, the claim or dogma of Christianity that Jesus Christ is the one Lord and Savior of mankind.¹ Propelled by the thrust of the Enlightenment, an attitude of human optimism and tendencies toward universalism challenged orthodox Christian attitudes toward the need for world evangelization.

The Gospel for the Whole World

The Reformation spawned a plethora of ideas and visions both conservative and revolutionary, but it failed to inspire a hope for world mission. As Gustav Warneck made clear in the late 19th Century,² the major Reformers were generally interested in other concerns than Jesus’ call to preach, teach, and disciple all nations. Much of their attention, and the energies of their successors, was focused on theological concord in the face of the common opponent. Ironically, the rise of Enlightenment was paralleled by an incipient concern for world evangelism. The Luthern pietists, Plutschau and Ziegenbalg, were followed by the missionaries of the Moravians (the “Unitas Fratrum”) who carried the gospel to North America. William Carey launched the “Great Century”³ with its commitment to the spreading of the Gospel. A host of great missionaries and mission movements dominated the 19th century. Adoniram Judson in Burma, David Livingstone in Africa, James Hudson Taylor in China, Robert Speer, the Student Volunteer Movement, and the Oriental Missionary Society are names calling up memories of a unique era in Christian world evangelization.

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Religious Syncretism

The passing years produced a counterforce to this Christian vision in liberalism's History of Religions School. Fueled by such thinkers as Ritschl, Harnack, Gunkel, and many more, the approach became reductionistic. Christianity was viewed as one religion among many. It was argued that the Middle East was a religious melting pot, that Jesus of Nazareth borrowed religious currents from Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and the "mystery religions," to create a synthetic Christianity. Occasionally, one hears echoes of this synthetic, if not syncretistic, religion of Jesus in contemporary teaching. It is easy to understand why Christian liberalism found great difficulty in perpetuating the missions' enterprise. Instead, evangelization of mankind was reinterpreted and sublimated to a process of education, emphasis on the value of indigenous religion, and insistence upon mutual respect for the "varieties of religious experience," to use William James' phrase.

The rise of "religious consciousness" in the Third World, notably an aggressive Islam, as well as a missionary zeal emanating from Buddhism, Hinduism, and scores of cultic variations, particularly in America, has shattered the tolerant illusions of a universal religion. Arnold Toynbee sought to overcome a limiting Judeo-Christian monotheism, the vision of a jealous God who permitted no other gods to stand alongside Him.⁴ William Ernest Hocking desired a world faith, proposing a "reconception" which would draw the highest values of various religions into an ascending structure. The "world faith" would be a dynamic integration releasing mankind from the "tragedy" of competitive offers of salvation.⁵

The New Orthodoxy

In a contrary perspective neoorthodoxy lashed out against liberal latitudinarianism, asserting that only one vision is enduring, that which came from the divine invasion of history. All "religion" is an idolatrous and human reach for salvation but in the incarnation of Jesus the Christ one finds God's reach toward man. The religions arise out of history; they have nothing to do with the history of salvation. Against arguments like that of Heinz Schlette, who argued that adherents of other religions were saved *because* of their faith,⁶ Barth, Hendrick Kraemer, and Edmund Perry, among many, insisted that no authentic saving vision arises via the natural or created order.⁷ Barth, educated in the mediating tendencies of liberal

thought, rebelled with a passion during the painful era of World War I. Yet Barth himself did not address world evangelization with clarity, offering a “Christological universalism” which vitiates the call of Jesus Christ to world evangelization.⁸

The Fading Vision

Surely it is ironic that the declining vision of world evangelization among mainline Christian churches should be paralleled by an enhanced missionary zeal among other religions. The complacency of evangelical Christianity, a multitude numbering in the millions in the United States alone, reflects an accommodation to the prevailing culture. The equation of success, especially material aggrandizement with the blessing of God, has infected many American evangelicals. This coming-to-terms with a success ethic has been paralleled by a diffidence toward winning the world to Christ. Many of these same persons have been anesthetized by the “apocalyptic pessimism” of Christian writers who confidently write of the darkening skies of civilization, the final holocaust, and the end of the age. Dwight L. Moody, who fervently preached this “gospel,” nevertheless sought to rescue as many souls from the sinking ship as possible. His “lifeboat” theology has been adopted by too few of his theological heirs who await the end in a kind of numbed passivity.

A Renewed Call to Mission

In the face of these historical and theological assessments, there stands the uncompromising call of Jesus. The church was founded as a divine community. Jesus announced to His disciples that the very life of the church was given for the purpose of evangelism. His concern transcended the provincial political hopes of his followers and reached toward the uttermost parts of the earth. The power to carry off the Christian mission was promised and given. Acts 1:8 is the paradigm for the history of missions, announcing the global nature of the church’s task and the energy resources for accomplishing the work until the end comes. The Apocalypse of John announces that the church will stand in the splendor of Christ’s victory. Surely, Christ’s kingdom of love will prevail.

A Wesleyan Theology for Mission

In a very real sense, the resurgence of a zealous missionary spirit in the world, makes the Christian apologetic burden less acute. If this is

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so, the primary concern to preach the Word may occupy greater attention by Christian believers. The apologetic task, of course, never ends, but the evangelical vision must always be the end of our efforts. Wesleyanism has always recognized and fleshed out that priority in active evangelization.

The purpose of this essay may now be broached. In the face of an uncertain Christian response to world evangelization, what may the Wesleyan heritage offer to the theology of mission? Where does it stand vis-a-vis liberalism, neoorthodoxy, contemporary evangelicalism, and fundamentalism? The thesis proposed here is that Wesleyanism offers both a theology and praxis of mission; that it proposes in its theology of Christian perfection the motivating force for carrying it out; and that it seeks to achieve this end while recognizing the tension between tolerance of another's *right* to the "free exercise of religion" and the Christian's faith-mandated right to offer Christ to everyone, regardless of personal religious persuasion.

A Wesleyan Theology for World Evangelization — Ecumenical Themes

In the Wesleyan heritage a precise theology of mission is readily apparent. While limited attention has been placed upon early Methodism's contribution to world missions, there is a consistent theology which lends credence to the world mission's enterprise. Paul Schilling has demonstrated that Wesley's view of the church includes particularly its mission.⁹ Manifested in his view of the church, it was fleshed out in his ministry in America and in his commissioning of missionaries to minister to America in the last third of the century.

To detail and interpret this theology of mission, we employ the term "ecumenical." This word evokes many responses today, but in its original sense *oikoumene* meant "the inhabited world." It referred to something possessing universal scope or significance. The seven church councils from A.D. 325-787 became known as ecumenical councils. Bishops from the entire world of Christendom were present and the theological issues they debated and clarified became dogma for the whole Christian world.

This essay employs "ecumenical" as descriptive of those Wesleyan doctrines which have application to the whole world to which the Christian mission is carried. In essence, distinctive Wesleyan insights are recognized to be ecumenical (or universal) in application and scope. The word "ecumenical" is employed to categorize these

doctrines in preference to “universal.” Why? In dealing with the doctrine of universal grace it is a short step in nomenclature to universalism or the doctrine of the salvation of all. While the use of “ecumenical” has its own problems, it does express (or is meant to express) a set of theological convictions which speak to the universal human dilemma. These teachings do not address universal problems like sin, salvation, or human responsibility with restrictive answers.

The term “ecumenical” delineates the distinctive Wesleyan belief in the promise of cosmic soteriology. Wesleyan thought supersedes both the soteriological restrictions of Reformed theology with its “particularism of grace” (Max Weber) and the ultimate removal of all divine boundaries implicit in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and explicit in the propositions offered by Origen of Alexandria, or in certain expressions of modern religious liberalism. To be more precise, Reformed theology affirmed human sinfulness as universal, while restricting the possibility of salvation. Chardin’s vision of the “omega point,” a metaphor for Jesus Christ, drew upon the hypothesis of human evolution as an analogy of the divine impulse toward universal salvation. Burdening this optimistic dream is the shadow side of human existence wherein responsible man in freedom chooses to opt out of this cosmic ascent. Teilhard did not take human sin and free agency with adequate seriousness.

Origen did not overrate human potential (or underrate sin). Nevertheless his conception of the ultimate restoration of all things, rests upon a slender base. Erecting his structure upon the Pauline eschatology in Romans eight, he failed to consider adequately Romans 1-7. Moreover, Romans 9 and 10 do not present a view of a sovereign God whose will is capricious. Rather God declares that salvation is free to those who freely believe. And whoever will come may come. God’s will has made man’s will free, truly responsible for his decisions.

Religious liberalism maximized human progress and the infinite potential of human reason. Asserting a radical conception of divine immanence, liberalism believed that the divine in every one would overcome the retarding drag of ignorance and selfishness. Thus, we recognize a contemporary version of the doctrine of universalism.

The Wesleyan ecumenical doctrines steer between the rocks of Reformed particularism and the universalism of Origen, Chardin, or liberalism. The Wesleyan positions are inclusive in that they apply to all persons in the world. Because they address the whole human race

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without the intrusions of social, economic, or theological elitism, they offer a powerful rationale for world evangelization. (Their importance for social ethics also are so powerful they must not be overlooked.)¹⁰

Christian evangelism must be ecumenical. It cannot rest upon provincial doctrines, whether social or theological, and expect to carry out its task. For evangelism is by definition and by Christ's mandate ecumenical (to and for the inhabited world). The grace of God which proffers salvation is an ecumenical teaching. Christ's death, man's free agency, the possibility of faith, the possibility of perfection, the holism grounded in God's creative order are central to this ecumenical theology. There is no element of elitism in Wesleyan thought; no particularism of grace, freedom, faith, perfection, or human value. If perfectionism has appeared to possess an elitist or particularist image, it is because both within and without Wesleyanism the promise of perfection has been wrongly judged to be for the few. Wesleyanism interprets the fulness of the Spirit as God's promise to *all* who believe. These teachings give evangelism a theological undergirding, which makes evangelism both logical, mandatory, and possible.

Wesleyan theology offers such promise to world evangelization because it moves from the simple premise that Christ died for all, and that everyone who believes this will be saved. It is acknowledged that not all *are* or *will be* saved but that all *may be saved*. Wesley rarely concerned himself with the question: "Will the heathen be lost?" He spent himself in mission preaching for sixty years. Wesley was the man of the "world parish" and his successors have faithfully pursued the cause of missions to the ends of the earth. This was the theology of:

Universal Grace

Wesley was convinced that the grace of God is made available to every man and woman in the world. Through grace every person is free to accept God's love in Christ. The Pauline affirmation in Romans 9 and 10 that those who believe are God's elect became Wesley's *apologia* for evangelism. This did not mean that anyone could act in faith prior to God's action. God's call to man always precedes any human step and makes that step possible. That all may come to Christ, because of God's determining decision before the foundation of the world, permeated Wesley's thinking and made his

commitment to world evangelism valid. The biblical claim that all who hear may be saved, spurred Wesley to proclaim the message across the land. In ethical terms this means that every person is privileged for all may possess eternal life.

If God calls every human being, then Christian evangelism has a fruitful field in which to work. The field is the world! The canon law of the Church of England circumscribed the sphere of ministry. Intended to prevent disorderly efforts by unauthorized evangelists, the law of 1604 resulted in the restriction of evangelism and spiritual and social reform. The Church of England was by most indicators a sleeping giant. Its ministry was elitist, neglecting the poor and oppressed. Samuel Pepys in his *Diary* portrayed the Church as generally shallow, while Jonathan Swift's *Tale of a Tub* presented it as noisy and slovenly. Protestantism was presented by Swift as self-seeking and vacillating. The Church which Elizabeth I so significantly shaped was a structure of moderation conceived to contain the forms and expressions of a church committed to the *via media*. It feared exaggeration and enthusiasm. Evangelism implies a passionate concern to win the souls and minds of the uncommitted. The Church of England was not convinced of the essential truth of human sinfulness. Too engrossed in the politics of the social order, the clergy were unprepared to carry out the evangelical imperative. Sir Godfrey Copley spoke of the church: "It is fit for the people, subject to the laws and most suitable for the clergy. For here, without care, without thought and, without trouble, honour and ease are enjoyed at once. . . ." Peter Gay concluded in his work, *The Enlightenment*: "These were the professional soldiers of Christianity, living without care, without thought, and without trouble."¹¹

Into that largely dormant church Wesley moved with his gospel of salvation for all. The message was revolutionary. The Wesleyan revolution was grounded not in political rights, such as John Locke had taught, but in free grace for everyone. Wesley's message was not an appeal to class, based upon human criterion or promise, but upon God's decision. The human wreckage of Gin Lane, portrayed so powerfully by the artist Hogarth, became hymn singers:

For this (no longer sons of night)
To Thee our thankful hearts are given
To Thee who called us into light
To Thee we die, to Thee we live.

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Suffice that for the season past
Hell's horrid language filled our tongues
We all Thy words behind us cast,
And loudly sang the drunkard's songs.

But, O the power of grace divine
In hymns we now our voices raise.

The doctrine of universal grace is in full accord with the mandate to world evangelism. If God's grace is free to all men, there must be no hesitance concerning its announcement to all. Jesus' commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth is illogical unless the message is truly free for all. A clear corollary of this is that all need the message. The Reformed opinion that grace is sufficient for all but that it is not efficient to all limits the call for world evangelization. Wesleyans think that universal grace is a divinely legitimated offer. There is no person who is not under grace. God has predetermined through His grace that all will be called, given the gift of faith, and the freedom either to "work" that faith or to sustain a self-trust which is the essence of original sin.

Universal Sinfulness — Human Inability

A second point of theological pertinence for evangelism in the Wesleyan model is the belief in original sin (or the fatal flaw, or the "loathsome leprosy" as Wesley described it.)¹² Here it may appear that Wesley may be holding a contrary doctrinal point. How do you hold in theological balance a view of radical sinfulness with a view of universal grace? The answer is found in Wesley's concept of prevenient grace.

Wesley's view of man, as he would be if grace were withheld, was as gloomy as Augustine, Calvin, and Luther's views. It was a doctrine of radical evil which even Reinhold Niebuhr could appreciate.

Wesley held no Utopian misconceptions of the human possibility apart from grace. In his long tract on "original sin" he lamented the irrationality of the "reasonable" man. With Dean Swift he satirized the tragic aberrations and fatal departures from goodness and truth in man's experiences. Taking war as his illustration he wrote:

What must mankind be, before such a thing as war could ever be known or thought of upon earth? How shocking,

how inconceivable a want must there have been of common understanding as well as common humanity before . . . any two nations in the Universe could once think of such a method of decision? If, then, all nations, . . . do, in fact, make this their last resort, what further proof do we need of the utter degeneracy of all nations from the plainest principles of reason and virtue? Of the absolute want, both of common sense and common humanity, which runs through the whole race of mankind.¹³

We may debate the analogies which Wesley used to describe the presence of sin in the human spirit. He was sometimes Augustinian without carrying his doctrine to Augustinian extremes. Augustine was never able to make an adequate distinction between sexuality and sinfulness. Wesley avoided that, for all his naivete regarding women. His analogies for diagnosing the recurrent presence of sin are varied. Robert Chiles in *Theological Transitions in American Methodism — 1790-1935* describes Wesley's approach:

“Sin is not so much ontological degradation or demolition of human reality as it is illness or contagion; not so much biological and sub-personal distortion as it is an inversion of relationships involving motive and intention.”¹⁴

However Wesley defined it, the more important fact is that he saw man's recurrent tragic failure, his consistent sinfulness, his estrangement from God and neighbor. Wesley knew that man needs to be saved, to be made whole in his personal and social relations.

Many persons who happily identify with the Wesleyan heritage have had difficulty with Wesley's assessment of human nature. In America there has been a clear tendency toward moralistic assessments. The assumption is that education regarding human lapses and errors will lead to correction. In Chiles's study (a great study, I think) American Methodism has tended to move away from “free grace to free will” and from “sinful man to moral man.”¹⁵ That tendency toward moralism was very characteristic of Wesley's own era. His contemporary, Thomas Jones of Saultwark, wrote:

“We have preached morality so long that we have hardly any morality left; and this moral preaching has made our people

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so very immoral that there are no lengths of wickedness which they are not afraid of running into.”¹⁶

This radical disease, flaw, or leprosy, requires the healing of grace. Too often we have yielded to despair at the persistence of evil in our fellowmen, until the experience of the other person becomes the experience of hell. Harry Emerson Fosdick, no slouch when it came to affirmations of man’s potential, delivered a sermon on “The Modern World’s Rediscovery of Sin.”

“Liberal Christianity . . . has on the whole been complacent about human nature. Now, however, we face a difficult era, with such cruel and depraved things afoot in the world as some of us have never seen before. Today we and our hopes and all our efforts of goodness are up against a powerful antagonism, something demonic, tragic, terrific in human nature, that turns our loveliest qualities to evil and our finest endeavors into failure. Our fathers called that sin. If you have a better name for it, use it, but recognize the realistic fact.”

Fosdick called for repentance since “we need Christ’s radical remedy for our radical disease.”¹⁷

In evangelism, Wesley never tried to cover up this tragic feature of man’s existence. It was complementary to his total message, his familiar theme: “Offering Christ.” To sinful men, Wesley offered Christ; Christ was moral exemplar, but much more, He was savior from sin. Expressed therapeutically, He was healer of persons disoriented and diseased.

Human Responsibility — The Doctrine of Prevenient Grace

One of the distinctive Wesleyan themes is prevenient grace (the preceding grace of God; grace prior to human decision or action). In essence prevenient grace is *God’s preparatory work for evangelism*. Before the bearer of the good news proclaims his Word of reconciliation, God has prepared the soil. In Wesleyan thought, the fall of man is the fountain from which flows the rivers and oceans of human tragedy. Nevertheless, unlike the Reformed theology of depravity, Wesley’s theology stresses a divine gift for the fallen. God’s grace has intervened, long before purely human decision or

possibility arose. In his prevenient grace God determined, without any human contribution whatever, that all would receive the gift of conscience, free will, and the possibility of faith. Therefore, whenever anyone believes, that act rests upon the divine gift which makes faith possible.

God's grace is not an afterthought, a broken play in a cosmic football game. Grace is *His story*, the story of God accepting the consequences of man's willful misuse of His gifts, man's assertion of independence, man's rebellion against his creaturehood, man's desire to ascend to the status of God. Grace is God having chosen us before the world was formed.

Grace is God's prerequisite for evangelism, the *sine qua non* of salvation. Before human persons may respond, God acts. Man's responsibility is just that — response. Response to the action of another. Christian evangelism is based on a divine precedent. John Wesley wrote to Isaac Andrews in 1784:

“Undoubtedly faith is *the work of God*: and yet it is *the duty* of man to believe. And every man may believe *if* he will, though not *when* he will. If he seek faith in the appointed ways, sooner or later the power of the Lord will be present, whereby (1) God works, and by His power (2) man believes.”¹⁸

Wesley is precise in his theology of grace. Man may believe *if* he will, but not *when* he will. The *if* of faith is based on what God has made possible through the grace that precedes man's decision. The *when* is based upon the hearing of the Word, as Romans 10 teaches: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”

For Wesley, prevenient grace is a crucial theological foundation in the preaching of universal grace. God has acted sovereignly to make salvation freely available. No one is excluded by God. Only man may refuse it, but it may be refused. That is the dark side of the coin of free will.

The precedence of grace means that evangelism is possible. When the Gospel is preached, the prior work of God makes it possible that the saving work may be received by faith. Jesus' parable of the sower teaches the prospect of success and failure. Evangelism will not be uniformly successful because man's response is shaped not only by the Word but, contrarily, by the will of the hearer. There will be the

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trampled wayside soil where the good news cannot germinate. Nevertheless, God's Spirit is at work everywhere, preparing people even before the bearer of the message arrives. Expressed in the terms which Karl Barth and Emil Brunner debated with such vigor, there is a "point of contact" between God and man. That "point of contact" is not grounded in an order of creation, but in the order of reconciliation, that is, in prevenient grace.

The Appeal to Uncoerced Decision

If human responsibility is taken seriously, evangelism must be, as Wesley succinctly defined it, "offering Christ." In the Wesleyan heritage, evangelism is a gracious ministry characterized by compassion and respect. Wesley could not approve the tactics of those who employed either psychological, social, or theological forms of coercion to "assist" a person in reaching a decision. This is why he could not accept the Roman Catholic approach to evangelism since it, in his experience, was based upon a kind of persuasion that contradicts human integrity. When Wesley preached the message of Christ he declared it with "sense and grace."¹⁹

Wesley appealed to conscience and will. Conscience must be unfettered by religious or social sanctions. It is the expression of the essential freedom of humanity. The appeal of the evangel may be earnest, persuasive, and logical, but never coercive. If the decision is negative, that must be respected; if the choice is in error, the evangel must yield. The only option the messenger has is the continuance of the gracious spirit.

Wesley's abhorrence of religious constraint was based upon his reading and understanding of English religious intolerance. His Puritan forebears had suffered at the hands of the Restoration monarchy of Charles II. Much of the English monarchy prior to the Glorious Revolution were heavy-handed, narrow, and sometimes barbaric in their repression of religious dissidents. Wesley claimed that English liberty began with the Revolution.²⁰

One of the early Wesleyan hymns reflects the struggle to overcome the spirit of antipathy to persons of differing faiths:

The Spirit of my foes I caught,
 The angry, bitter zeal;
And fierce for my own party fought,
 And breathed the fire of hell.

Threat'ning I did and slaughter breathe,
(The flail of heresy),
And doom the sects to bonds, or death,
That did not think with me.

To propagate the truth, I fought
With fury and despite;
And, in my zeal for Israel, sought
To slay the Gibeonite.

“The temple of the Lord are we!”
And all who dared deny,
I would not have their conscience free,
But force them to comply.

With wholesome discipline severe
To conquer them I strove,
And drive into the pale through fear,
Who would not come through love.

Lord, I abhor, renounce, abjure,
The fiery spirit unclean,
The persecuting zeal impure,
The sin-opposing sin.

Let others draw, with fierce despite,
The eradicating sword,
And with the devil's weapons fight,
The battles of the Lord.

But O! my gracious God, to me
A better spirit impart;
The gentle mind that was in Thee,
The meekly loving heart.

The heart whose charity o'er flows
To all, far off, and near;
True charity to friends and foes,
Impartially sincere.

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*Heathens, and Jews, and Turks, may I,
And heretics embrace;
Nor e'en to Rome the love deny
I owe to all the race.*²¹

Discussing the crisis of conscience which affects family relations, Wesley asked: May a father in conscience prevent his wife and children from hearing even false teaching?

“Suppose your censure was just, and this was actually false doctrine. Still every one must give an account of himself to God; and you cannot compel another to see as you see; you ought not to attempt it. Reason and persuasion are the only weapons you ought to use, even toward your own wife and children.”²²

Wesley's personal experience was set almost exclusively in the British Isles, with a two-year missionary stint in America, and a short summer at Zinzendorf's Herrnhut in 1738. Nevertheless, as he so eloquently expressed it, he saw the whole world as his parish. When asked why he was making the journey to Georgia in 1735, he answered: “Why for a very plain reason. Because these heathens at home have Moses and the prophets, and those have not. Because these who *have* the gospel trample upon it, and those who have it not earnestly call for it. . . .”²³

Despite his limited personal involvement in mission, Wesley recognized its legitimacy, and its imperatives. As a pietist who affirmed the priority of experienced faith over its doctrinal verbalizations, Wesley's tolerance could be expanded to allow that a Muslim might be saved. That decision was God's, not man's. One may even debate whether Wesley allowed that the un-evangelized heathen (who still was blessed by prevenient grace) might be saved.²⁴ Nevertheless, the recurrent theme of Wesley's sixty years of ministry was Christ, and his consistent commitment was “offering Christ.” Compared to this task, these other questions were merely passing reflections.

If we emulate Wesley's fervent, yet tolerant spirit in world evangelization, we will be unremitting in our work as heralds of Christ. There will be no compromise on that point. Recognizing that God's prevenient grace has paved the way in the human mind and

spirit, the evangel will seek to persuade every hearer to believe. There will be no coercion except the appeal of Christ. No manipulation will be permitted, no dirty tricks. Even the right to be wrong will be recognized. Wesley believed strongly that every person stands responsible before God. The focus on human responsibility is an important ingredient in a Wesleyan theology of world evangelization. One cannot reconcile belief both in free agency and coercive evangelism. However, a humanistic tolerance cannot be reconciled with Wesley's passion to win men to Christ.

W.K. Jordan, author of *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, proposes a "philosophical toleration" which suggests readiness to concede to other persons the right to their own faith while maintaining one's own faith. He insists that a Christian who possesses an "evangelical intelligence," committed to evangelism, cannot exercise such tolerance.²⁵ Wesley, in fact, has pointed the way. He has not removed the "scandal of particularity" from Christian faith. His recognition of the conception of "common humanity" permits a respect for other persons which mediates both passionate intolerance and tepid tolerance of any position however exotic or extreme.

Human Wholeness — The Promise of Perfection

One more theme in Wesleyan thought expresses the promise of the Gospel to bring wholeness to humanity. The doctrine of Christian perfection, so inherently central to Wesleyan/Methodist contributions to Christian faith, belongs to the church's theology of mission.

What does Christian perfection offer to a strategy of world evangelization? Preeminently it holds forth the promise of divine love to a world alienated from the wholeness of the original creation. The essence of Christian perfection is wholeness; this is the meaning of the Greek word *teleiosis*. *Teleiosis* is the completeness or perfection of love.

Christian perfection is a doctrine large enough to offer healing for the whole earth. It is contained in the redemptive offering of Jesus Christ and in the pledge of the Holy Spirit. In the divine economy of salvation, the Father's will, before all creation, predetermined that whosoever will may enter into the fullness of God. Justification by grace through faith alone opens the way and Christian perfection, which is the way from justification to final glory, draws the believer onward to the perfection of the divine image in humanity. Wesley

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wrote: “By salvation I mean . . . a restoration of the soul to its primitive health.”²⁶

In a world obsessed with tragedy, thirst for power, and violence, it is no simple choice to opt for and to articulate faithfully the promise of perfection. Has not Reinhold Niebuhr, the guru of Christian realism, asserted that any pretension to perfection requires that we skip blithely over the boiling caldron of sinful imperfection which is discoverable just beneath the surface of our illusion? Have we not forgotten the lessons of Romans seven?

The Wesleyan message points the way toward overcoming the “pessimism of nature” by the “optimism of grace” (to recall Gordon Rupp’s distinction). Romans seven is one of the Scripture’s starkest pictures of spiritual and psychological warfare within the awakened sinner’s life. Wesley as we have seen faced the problem of sin squarely. Without God and grace, sinful humanity’s freedom to will always means willing to do evil. However, the somber shadows of Romans seven are driven away by the brightness of Romans eight. There St. Paul presents the cosmic expansion of the saving work of Christ. Salvation in that magnificent chapter moves from individual sonship to the restoration of the whole created order. That is the universalism of the Gospel, interpreted to us by Paul, and at the heart of Wesley’s preaching. Not the ultimate restoration of all things after the fashion of Origen, but the salvation of whosoever will and the restoration of the creation which sighs for the dawning day when its subjection to vanity will be succeeded by “deliverance from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20-21). That many will choose not to enter God’s glorious drive toward the restoration of all creation, Wesley has no doubt. Tragically, the shadow side of human free will means final separation from God. The goal of God’s reconciling work in Christ is the final salvation of whoever *will* be saved *along with* those creatures and that creation which awaits the pleasure of humankind. The ultimate irony is that the wholeness of God belongs to everyone and everything He created, *except* those who bear the image of God in freedom but who prostitute that greatest of gifts (speaking within the order of creation) to the service of self.

The church in mission is *motivated* by the concept of perfect love. Out of this inspiration comes the vision which the world awaits and for which it longs (because prevenient grace is at work in humanity). The perfection of love entails purity of life (personal ethics) and

active love (social ethics). It expresses a relationship which unites the infinite energy of God with the vast potential of his creature — man and woman. Whereas the concept of Christian love in some of Wesley's mentors (William Law, Lorenzo Scupoli, or Thomas a Kempis) is suppliant, submissive, or passive, in Wesley it becomes aggressively active, vigorous, and energetic.

Wesley's conflict with Count Zinzendorf illustrates the point. Daniel Benham, a Moravian apologist, expressed it squarely:

“Wesley desired to give a prominent place in his system . . . to the doctrine of an *active love*, proceeding from the *new birth* and faith; . . . and to the doctrine of the furtherance of this *active love* by the *means of grace in the church*. Zinzendorf . . . allowed of none other than a *grateful love*. . . .”²⁷

The difference is plain to see.

Wesley's theology of perfect love has immediate relevance both for evangelism and ethics. In evangelism it works out in two ways. First, the love of God and the neighbor find an intersection and unity in the heart and mind of the evangelist. To suggest that perfect love is the basis of a compulsion to share the good news is to state the obvious. Love leads to evangelism in the Wesleyan sense which means the call to share with others — “to invite, to convince, to offer Christ, to build up — and to do this in some measure, in every sermon.”²⁸ The evangelist must nurture his converts.

Perfect love could have no standing ground if it didn't issue in evangelism, in the replication of Christ in other lives. Outler writes: “For Wesley, the scope of evangelism was never less than the fulness of Christian experience — ‘holiness of heart and life conformable to the same’ — and he never faltered in this insistence even when his societies began to bulge and Methodism began to be respectable.”²⁹

The *second* point of significance for evangelism in this teaching is the positive dimension of process, improvement, and growth. As the believer *is and becomes* perfect in love, he moves toward a *telos*, the image of Christ. That a doctrine of progress is needed in the theology of Christian life is self-evident. The concept of love's perfection summarizes that doctrine for believers, and the church. In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley stressed the improvable character of perfection. Perfect love is an attractive theological doctrine emphasizing the whole process of salvation in the whole life

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of the Christian. Evangelism which incorporates teleology is positive evangelism.

For social ethics, the doctrine of perfection contains the promise of progress. In both personal and social ethics there must be a solid basis for improvement. W.R. Cannon insists that Wesley's doctrine gives depth and force to social schemes of reconstruction and plans for the improvement of mankind.³⁰

Teilhard de Chardin has written: "An animal may rush headlong down a blind alley or towards a precipice. Man will never take a step in a direction he knows to be blocked."³¹

In Wesley's doctrine of perfect love — love of God and neighbor — are linked together personal and social ethics. Wesley was convinced, and stated his conviction, that perfect love leads to concern for sick, poor, deprived, widow, and alienated persons.

Perfect love at work in the world! John Wesley "grasped the secret of the Word made social, and of the faith that works by love not only in the heart but in the world as well."³² Wesley's grand dictum explaining the *raison d'être* of Methodism was, "To reform the nation and especially the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land." The Wesleyan heritage had and has a reformist mission which is linked to the doctrine of perfect love; a distinctive conjunction of reform and perfection.

Wesley represents the reformer who by exemplifying and amplifying the idea of love for God and neighbor, works to bring about the transformation of society. Perfect love leads to social change, to involvement in the world. Carl Michalson had declared that perfect love prepares a person to enter the world, freed from the idolatries of the world order, liberated to assume responsibility for the world, and to work for its transformation.³³

The Wesleyan commitment to wholeness speaks volumes to the needs of our world, searching for liberation, and finding in many promises of liberation — economic, psychological, social, or religious — the narrowing and confining of our borders of hope. Marxism has long since exploded its pristine illusions and revealed that behind the facade of beauty there crouches the beast.

Wesley's "liberation theology" is, first, starkly realistic in its assessment of the human dilemma, and, second, bright with hope in its vision of what earth may be. Wesleyan theology affirms the poetry of promise offered by Charles Wesley.

Our earth we now lament to see
With floods of wickedness o'erflow'd
With violence, wrong and cruelty,
One wide-extended field of blood
Where men like fiends each other tear
In all the hellish arts of war.

O might the universal Friend
This havoc of His creatures see!
Bid our unnatural discord end;
Declare reconcil'd in Thee;
Write kindness on our hidden parts,
And chase the murderer from our hearts.

Who now against each other rise,
The nations of the earth constrain
To follow after peace, and prize
The blessings of Thy righteous reign
The joys of unity to prove,
The paradise of perfect love.

Christian perfection — driving toward the healing and wholeness of every person and the created order. This is the message of the Wesleys and their inheritors. With it the theology of mission finds a promised apex. The “particularism of grace” has been overcome, encompassed and expanded into an *oikoumene*, “for the whole inhabited earth.”

Footnotes

¹Walter M. Horton, in his concern to develop an ecumenical approach to Christian theology, nevertheless is bold to insist:

“It ought never to be denied, and it cannot finally be concealed, that Christians are united in final loyalty to one Lord, who is for them the Savior of the whole world, and whose authority for them takes precedence over every earthly authority whatsoever.” See his *Christian Theology: An Ecumenical Approach*, Revised Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 296.

He cites the Jerusalem missionary conference of 1928:

“Our message is Jesus Christ. He is the revelation of what God is, and what

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men through Him may become.” Of this statement Horton writes, “This is an offensive and scandalous claim, a stumbling block to intolerant Moslems and a foolishness to tolerant Hindus and Buddhists; but it is the heart of the Christian faith and must be candidly confessed as such.”

When attention is given to Vatican II’s decree on “Non-Christian Religions,” the note of affirmation and toleration is seen as dominant. Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are praised for their profound search for truth. Separated from the decree on “The Church’s Missionary Activity” this decree seems to offer an unusual approval of these faiths, a close approximation to the “many paths to God” position. But the second decree removes any doubt that Vatican II is unfaithful to the principle of world evangelization. See Walter M. Abbot, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), pp. 580-633, 656-671.

²Gustav Warnecke, *Evangelische Missionslehre*. See Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964).

³Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937-45). See especially volumes IV, V, and VI.

⁴Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian’s Approach to Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956). See my essay, “Toynbee’s Approach to the History of Religions,” *Journal of Religious Thought* (Spring-Summer, 1977), pp. 40-48.

⁵William Ernest Hocking, *Living Religions and A World Faith* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), pp. 190-208.

⁶Heinz R. Schlette, *Towards A Theology of Religions* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966) pp. 63-107.

⁷Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933); Hendrik Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962); Edmund Perry, *The Gospel in Dispute* (Garden City New York, 1958). Barth, of course, presented another aspect in his *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961). See Horton, pp. 298-304 on the neo-Orthodox position.

⁸See Heinz Zahrnt, *The Question of God* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1969), pp. 93-98. Whether Barth was a universalist is certainly a debated issue. I simply claim that his views weakened concern for world evangelization.

⁹See Gerald Anderson, ed., *Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), for essays by ten major Methodist scholars. With the exception of S. Paul Schilling’s, “The Church and Its Ministry,” pp. 17-41, the Wesleyan basis is virtually overlooked. Why? The same criticism is addressed to Dow Kirkpatrick, ed., *The Finality of Christ* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966) written primarily by Methodists.

¹⁰See my essay, “The Church and Social Transformation: An Ethics of the Spirit,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (Spring, 1976), pp. 49-61. Also published in *Evangelical Review of Theology* (April 1979), pp. 82-95.

¹¹Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1966), p. 345.

¹²Wesley, *Sermons I*, ed., William Sugden, 5th edition (London: Epworth Press, 1961), p. 323.

¹³Wesley, *Works IX*, “The Doctrine of Original Sin,” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958-59), p. 222.

¹⁴(New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 122.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, chapters 4 and 5.

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¹⁶Quoted in Arthur Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart: John Wesley Evangelist* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1967).

¹⁷Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Living Under Tension* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), pp. 112-13, 120.

¹⁸Wesley, *Letters*, VII (London: Epworth Press, 1931), pp. 202-203.

¹⁹See his comment on "Gospel preaching," quoted in Gerald Ensley, *John Wesley Evangelist* (Nashville: Tidings, 1958), p. 42.

²⁰*Works*, XI, p. 137.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 194-95, "A Word to a Protestant."

²²*Ibid.*, VIII, p. 125, "A Farther Appeal."

²³*Letters* I, "To the Rev'd John Burton" (October 19, 1735), pp. 188-91.

²⁴See his comments on Romans 2 in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1966), pp. 523-525.

²⁵See Jordan's concept in Volume I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), p. 16.

²⁶*Works*, VIII, p. 47. Examination of the Wesley hymns show the important correlation of holiness, health, and wholeness, e.g., in "Love Divine."

Finish then Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in Thee.

Even more explicit in these hymns are the motifs of holiness and wholeness:

O come, and dwell in me,
Spirit of power within!
And bring the glorious liberty,
From sorrow, fear, and sin.
The seed of sin's disease,
Spirit of health, remove,
Spirit of finish'd holiness,
Spirit of perfect love.

Or:

Saviour from sin, I want to prove
That Jesus is Thy healing name:
To lose, when perfected in love,
Whate'er I have, or can, or am;
I stay me on Thy faithful Word,
"The servant shall be as his Lord."

²⁷Daniel Benham, *Memoirs of James Hutton* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1856), p. 112.

²⁸Cf. the "Large Minutes" (1744) I, p. 23, cited in Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 97 n.3.

²⁹*Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971), p. 24.

³⁰Outler, *Theology*, p. viii. Foreword by William R. Cannon.

³¹*The Phenomenon of Man* (N.Y., Harper & Row, 1959), 229.

³²Outler, *Evangelism*, p. 26.

³³Carl Michalson, *Worldly Theology: The Hermeneutical Focus of an Historical Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 155.