

A fundamental ambiguity in the Methodist Movement

by

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Introduction

The present paper, presented at the Oxford Institute 2002, is part of a wider work. This is an introductory part to a hypothesis. It has more questions than answers and even though we add the missing chapters it would be still a hypothesis.

The question that launched my curiosity, was that of Theodore Jennings: “Why did Wesley fail?”¹ That question was complemented by Donald Dayton’s assertion about “a fundamental ambiguity in the Wesleyan legacy”² regarding the Methodist position towards the poor.

In my experience, by studying about Methodist history as well as by living the every day life of the Methodist church, I find that that ambiguity is a reality that it is hard to be understood. Sometimes this ambiguity pushed the church to a split without return; other times, different views of mission coexist in a more or less fraternal “connivance”. On other occasions the ambiguity is much more difficult to discover in a quick overlook, because it is grounded in some kind of invisible pattern of institutional behavior. This last kind of ambiguity is the worst, because it is not represented by different factions, parties, etc, but it is present in the very “raison d’être” (reason of being) of the institutional church. It is kind of paralyzing feeling that Paul once had: “I know the good things I have to do, but I can’t do them”. The Methodist Church, I think, has a considerable open minded social and political agenda all over the world. It has talked a lot about poverty, social engagement and human rights. However, I hardly know a poor’s mainline Methodist Church. It seems to be a manifest destiny for the Methodist Church being an enlightened middle class institution, with the best intentions, indeed.

That is the kind of ambiguity whose origins I try to clarify in this study. The point is: where is this ambiguity grounded? Jennings pointed that Wesley’s followers did not take seriously his late writings. He says that only Wesley’s “Standard Sermons” - which presents more vacillation with respect to evangelical economics - have occupied the main place in the

¹Theodore W. Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John’s Wesley’s Evangelical Economics*, (Chapter 8). Nashville: Abington Press, 1990.

²Donald Dayton, “*Good news to the poor*”: the Methodist experience after Wesley, in *The portion of the poor: Good news to the poor in the Wesleyan tradition*, ed, by M.Douglas Meeks, Nashville: Kingdom Books, 1995.

study of Wesley, after his death “The result is that only that portion of Wesley is generally read which opens the door to an anti-Wesleyan ethic!”³

Jennings finds the reason for this partial reading of Wesley’s works in the late efforts of Wesley to maintain Methodism gathered after his death. The institutional proclamations such as the Deed of Declaration have played a very negative role in the movement, and, therefore, the last half of his life and thought was eclipsed by the first, which had not yet been polluted with the problem of the “succession to the throne” and its consequences.

Dayton, on the other hand, suggests that the root of the problem has to be found in the very lacking of Wesley’s theological clarity about the poor.

...I can probably agree with Jennings that ‘every aspect of Methodism was subjected to the criterion, how will this benefit the poor?’ I am less convinced than Jennings that Wesley lifts this to the level of theological principle. His practice seems to make an option for the poor constitutive of the life of the church, but I am less clear how he would argue the theological grounding of his praxis. It seems to me that one reason for the neglect of this theme in later generations is that Wesley did not ground his practice sufficiently theologically to make the issue normative for those who would claim him as a mentor in following centuries.⁴

I agree with Dayton that the roots of the problems have to be found before Wesley’s death and not in arbitrary further interpretations. However I think the main problem is not related to the theological field but to a more profound level that is the concept and use of institutional power.

At the same time, I agree with Jennings that the late efforts of Wesley to maintain Methodism after his death played a very negative roll in the movement, but not in the way Jennings claims.

³Jennings, 168.

⁴ Donald Dayton, 67.

Just as an anticipation, I may say that I do not agree with the division between Wesley's political conception and his practical economics, established by Jennings⁵. These are very related issues, especially when we are talking about a man who was not only a preacher, a theologian, and thinker, but mainly a churchman, a leader, and an institutional politician. That is to say he was a man who dealt with power. For that reason, his conception of politics, that is, his way to deal with power, is not a minor detail.

The hermeneutic circle

I use a particular paradigm in order to be able to detect the point where the chain is broken, and the poor's church project is cancelled. It is the so called "The Hermeneutic Circle," created by Bultmann, but recreated by the Uruguayan theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, in his book *Liberation of Theology*⁶. Segundo recreates this paradigm in order to enable theology to make new and rich interpretations of the Bible (re-readings) from different places (social situations) from where the reader is located. I use it not as related to the reading of the Bible but as to the interpretation of the church. In this case, Wesley's intuition is about a new way to be a church.

The circle presupposes the following four steps:

First: there is a way to experience reality which leads us to a suspicion that things around us might be better than they are in reality.

Second: That suspicion has to be applied to the whole structure of our thought, in order to prevent our old ideological patterns from eclipsing the new reality that we experienced.

Third: That new way to understand reality must lead us to think that the prevailing way to understand the church has not much to do with the new reality.

Fourth: That suspicion on church has to lead us to a **new way to be church**, according to the new reality.

⁵ See the introduction of Jennings' *Good news to the Poor*

⁶Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, translated by John Drury, New York: Maryknoll Books, 1984.

I would now like to apply this paradigm to Wesley's Methodist movement experiment.

1. There is a way of experience reality which leads us to a suspicion that things around us might be better than they are.

The cruel and dramatic reality of London in the mid-eighteenth century was not hidden from Wesley's eyes. On the contrary, he could see the reality of poverty and misery. Just to quote one of the many references to this situation. John Wesley describes this reality in *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions*:

I have known those who only afford to eat a little coarse food once every other day. I have known one in London (and one that the few years before have all the conveniences of life) picking up from a dunghill stinking sprats, and carrying them home for herself and her children. I have known another gathering the bones which the dogs have left in the streets and making broth of them, to prolong a wretched life! I have heard a third artlessly declare "Indeed I was very faint, And so weak I could hardly walk, until my dog finding nothing at home, went out and brought in a good sort of bone, which I took out of his mouth and made a pure dinner!" That is the case at these days of multitude of people in a land flowing, as it were, with milk and honey! Abounding with all the necessaries, the conveniences, the superfluities of life! (XI: 53-54)

The first step in obtaining this circle was indubitably done. Wesley, having known that misery did not turn his face from that reality. He not only suspected, but he was sure that things were not as good as they could be.

2. That suspicion has to be applied to the whole structure of our thought, in order to prevent our old ideological patterns to eclipse the new reality we experienced.

The structures of thought include our beliefs. In this sense we may ask whether Wesley could apply to his faith, the new reality of poverty he knew. And of course, we must say that he did it. The encounter between reality and faith was what made his practical biblical theology develop.

In several research studies about this topic, the poor had a very special, and a preferential place, as we can see. I will not discuss here the way in which Wesley theologically grasped the matter. The fact is that he did it. And doing that Wesley let everyday reality get into his understanding of faith. The second step was achieved successfully.

3. That new way to understand the reality must lead us to think that the prevailing way to understand the church has not much to do with the new reality.

Here we must ask ourselves whether Wesley's way to understand his Christian faith at the light of poverty helped in some way to change his church's experience.

Certainly, Wesley suspected that the High Anglican Church's practical religion was far removed from the reality of the streets of London. For that reason, from his early years he began a ministry primarily focused on the poor. The outdoor preaching, his ministry of pastoral visits to jails, hospitals, and his conception of stewardship were the main signals that pointed to a new way of being church which was growing within the Methodist movement. In this step we may place his strong practical divinity in favor of those outclassed from British society.

*4. That suspicion of church has to lead us to a **new way to be church**, according to the new reality.*

In my opinion, this is the step where the circle is broken. The new ecclesiological experience of Methodism was, in fact, morally supported and theologically designed in order to work for the poor. But the inner structure of the movement, what we may call "the institutional circulation of power", left no room for the poor. This dichotomy between "progressive outdoors" vs. "conservative indoors" is, from my point of view, the main reason for the "fundamental ambiguity" we are talking about in this paper.

Wesley's distrust of people's power as the source of political legitimacy, led him to build a movement that was far from democratic and popular, was close to what we know in history as "Enlightened Despotism". That type of monarchy spread in the times of Wesley's life through Germany, Sweden and Russia. Frederick II, Gustav IV and Catherine the Great, all claimed that

their power, however great, was exercised only within limits set by law and that the obligations inherent in his position made it impossible for them to govern in an arbitrary way.

Those were kinds of progressives monarchies open to the world and the people needs, but retaining the power in few hands.

This Wesleyan way to rule was the main source of disputes and conflicts after Wesley's death. This was also the reason for the organization of mainline Methodist churches, both in England and American Colonies, which hold strong signs of authoritarianism and delight for institutional power.

At the Biblical theology of the poor, mixed with a delight for institutional power perhaps may be grounded the “original label” of Methodism and the source for its historical ambiguity.

Conclusion

We have taken advantage of Segundo's hermeneutic circle and have applied it to the Wesley's journey towards a Methodist church of the poor. In this journey we have seen that Wesley was able to run successfully through the three first steps, that of the understanding the new reality of London and its poor; a reading of the Bible in the light of the reality of the poor; and the attempt to re-think the way to be a church. But, at the moment that Wesley was able to complete the circle and open a new church to the new reality, that circle was broken.

That new ecclesiological experience of Methodism was, in fact, morally supported and theologically designed in order to work for the poor. But the inner structure of the movement, which we may call “the institutional circulation of power”, left no room for the poor. In other words, the Wesleyan understanding and engagement with the poor was mainly emotionally grounded, rather than politically. His approach to poverty is more an “imitatio Christi-like,” rather than a reflexive political analysis. Therefore, his “solutions” were unable to go beyond that of an emotional view and response. In the moment he had to deal with structural design and definitions, for example in the structuring of the government of the church, he failed.

Wesley's distrust of people's power as the source of political legitimacy, led him to build a movement that was a type of middle-class enlightened elite. While the poor, certainly, had room in order to be served, they however, were hardly permitted to be a part of the politics of the church. His monarchical understanding of order and aversion to democracy, pushed him to transfer these monarchical principles both to the ruling of the movement during his life by his own hand, first, and after his death to the establishment of a closed cabinet type government or organization which derive into an Episcopal model, that is, a power-centered paternalistic model.

Shaped on this model over the years, almost all Methodist churches were developed according around the world. In them, the poor were left outside of the institutional power, at least outside of the boards, committees, leadership, etc. The poor had no power within the designing of the organization of the church so, they continued to be out-classed for Methodism. They are present in the agendas, buy they are not permitted to write the agenda.

This is the ambiguity of the Methodist Church: Methodism is the church that knows the problem, that looks face to face to the poor, and even many times walks through the mud with them. Sometimes, also, some Methodists have given their life for the struggles of the poor in many parts of the world. Surely Wesley would have also have done that. But like Wesley, Are we still unable to empower the fourth step that is to complete the circle authentically? It is a very heavy question and heritage, a historical ambiguity and paradox that perhaps some day we shall be able to answer and overcome.