

**MISSION AND EVANGELISM INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM
A WESLEYAN PERSPECTIVE**

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MISSION AND EVANGELISM INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

A WESLEYAN PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION: The story of John Wesley is of a man whose life was totally committed: not to a religion-not even to revival-but to God. It is this fact which makes many feel that John Wesley has a relevance for our time too.

Wesley was a practical man-whether in his theology or evangelism. The thrust of his theology was geared to his own needs and to the needs of his people. He turned not only to the Bible but out into the world. The thrust seemed to shift as needs shifted. Wesley's thoughts, like Fenelon's "soul" seemed to say: my progress is without end.

This brief paper intends, first of all to look into Wesley's eighteenth century context to understand the vision with which he set out to accomplish his mission of evangelization in his own time. Next, his methodology in using individuals, small groups and local congregations to accomplish the burden of his heart. Finally as we look into the dawn of another century, to examine if Wesley, his vision and his methods are still relevant.

I WESLEY'S CONTEXT

The beginning of eighteenth century had two theological emphases:

A Theology:

1. Those who used Aristotelian model believed that reality had to do with only things perceivable by sense experience. In other words they taught that reason leads to faith.

2. Those who used Platonic model believed that reality had to do with ideals. Matter though perceivable by sense experience, was an illusion. Since reality had to do with ideals, not perceivable by sense experience, understanding came by faith. In other words, they taught that faith leads to reason. So the result is that we find two divergent schools of thought. One insisting that faith comes by reason, the other that reason comes by faith. Coleridge claimed that we are all one or the other, but that no one can be both simultaneously.

B Society:

Society was in a state of social, economic and political change. Renowned writers indicated evidence of moral and spiritual erosion. Fielding, Swift, DeFoe, Pope, Addison, Johnson and others talked of enormous social, economic and moral change. The ethical norms and the morality of the people especially in the privileged classes underwent marked erosion. Economic order was under serious question. There was a marked gap of values between the young and the old.

C State of the Church:

Church as a power to shape her members' lives had been losing ground for about a century. Wesley spoke about a lifeless formal religion. The divergent emphases in theology did not excite people.

D: Nation:

Wesley's nation, though most powerful in the world, faced long-range and serious problems.

E Education:

Science was accepted as an alternative to religion. Spiritual power was not only unavailable but often unwanted.

F General Characteristics of the Period:

There was prosperity and progress on the one hand for the privileged, on the other hand the minorities were forgotten. Over 90% of the people had no vote or voice in the government. This was also an age of exploration and discovery.

Into this kind of world, to offer new life in Christ came John Wesley. He called people back to the Bible and urged them to go out into the world. Religion for the first time was taken out of its institutional framework and made a part of life.

Many scholars believe that eighteenth century Evangelical Revival in England was inevitable. Their argument is, that if John Wesley was not there, someone else would have been there as the necessary catalyst. Admittedly, there is some logic in this. Others believed that the times were also ripe for a moral and spiritual change in direction. The assumption, however,

that the primary reason for Wesley's impact on eighteenth century English society lies in the moral and social environment or Wesley's own ability as an extraordinary evangelist is not true entirely. Whatever impact was made through the instrumentality of John Wesley, was made because of the power of God. This power manifested in an imperfect instrument of obedience to bring about change in the religious and moral fibre of the nation. Man, however spiritually strong, alone could by no means effect this change. Wesley himself claimed that it took no less of a miracle to resurrect a dead soul than to resurrect a dead body. John Wesley the instrument of potential revival linked himself to the enabling power of God.

II MISSION OF THE CHURCH

As delineated in the New Testament, the Word calls the Church to evangelize, to nurture, to heal and to serve. Mission becomes the distinguishing mark of any Church which reflects the will and way of God.

Wesley distinguished five areas of mission of the Church:

A. To spread scriptural holiness throughout the world. This was not to form a new sect, but to reform the society and nation. He looked for an inward and outward holiness-the imitation of the perfection which was in Jesus our Lord.

B. To proclaim God's word in preaching and witness: Wesley often challenged individual experience as a criterion for truth. Since salvation is open to every person and assurance, the condition of the saved, evangelism is a major mission of the Church. One witnessed and evangelized not because experience led in that direction, but because the Word of God clearly commands such activity.

C. Wesley's missionary goal was the conversion of all peoples. Those saved could not afford to wait for individuals to come to Christ of their own accord. Faith being contagious, each Christian had a share in the redemptive ministry of God. To-day we have been talking of wholeness or the whole gospel. But this was very much Wesley's view. Salvation for Wesley was not just going to heaven or obtaining eternal happiness. It is not the soul's going to Paradise-not a blessing

which lies on the other side of death. Salvation was to experience the abundant life that Jesus our Lord came to give and then to share it with those who come in contact with us.

D. Wesley believed that the Church is to serve as God's agent in assuring justice for all. Personal commitment to human beings in love is the hallmark of the Church. In all his journals, nothing is more common than his call to the service and love of all peoples.

E. The claim that the world was his parish was not only the extent of his missionary concern, but the fullness of the gospel that he believed. His mission was to proclaim this message in word and deed throughout the world. This remains the essential mission of any Church to-day and for the future also.

Wesley's conception of mission was world wide-but the breadth of that responsibility was not just out there in another country. It was a responsibility which surrounded him wherever he found himself. Significantly he never went back to a foreign field after America. The truth is that mission followed him all his life. He never forgot world needs-but was very open to the needs of his immediate surroundings. He would be horrified to see Churches giving to the spread of the gospel in foreign lands while ignoring the responsibilities of mission in their own communities. For Wesley mission was total, involving a full commitment to both world needs and to immediate surroundings.

III DISCIPLINES OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS:

A. Importance of Family:

Wesley's parents were the source of his missional outlook. When John Wesley wanted to go on a mission to the Indians in America, his mother Susanna wrote to him, "had I twenty sons, I should rejoice, were they all so employed though I should never see them more".

B. Importance of Church:

Methodism was one of the first of the Protestant denominations to undertake overseas missions and one of the last to establish a missionary society. In less than one hundred years of its inception, Methodism had spread over three quarters of the globe. John Wesley emphasized labour and not so much results. Once he wrote in his journal, 'oh let none think his labour of

love is lost because the fruit does not immediately appear! Nearly forty years did my father labour here (Epworth), but he saw little fruit of all his labour.

C. Importance of Women:

Women of the Methodist Church took leadership seriously and made greater sacrifices in both missions and social concerns. In 1850 there were not more than twenty Methodist foreign Missionaries in the world. By 1920 there were over 2000! This was mainly because of the involvement and dedication of women. Approximately 60-70% of foreign missionary workers sent from United States in the 75 years between 1850-1925 were women. Unquestionably this was the period of the greatest growth of the Church outside the United States.

D. Impact of Methodism:

As a result of this sort of missionary work, around the world, girls and young women were given the opportunity of education for the first time by women missionaries. This brought a lot of hope in the respective societies where these women laboured. By these dedicated band of women, the hungry were fed, the sick were healed, the outcasts were loved, and the poor sought out, all in the name of Christ!

The Methodist Church rediscovered an idea that John Wesley taught and preached more than a century ago that the goal of mission and ~~ministry~~ ministry is not only individual salvation, but also accepting certain spiritual disciplines. The are:

1. Respect of the people and the culture of the other country.
2. A Commitment to service and needs of people.
3. A Commitment to national leadership in control of the work of the mission.
4. A commitment to the principles of righteousness and Justice.

Any programme of Christian missions must be balanced between an equal emphasis on the gospel revelation of individual salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ* Every saved person is called to the mission and ministry of discipleship and love wherever there is

* and the individual's obligation to co-operate with the Holy Spirit to establish righteousness and justice in the world.

human need. Wesley heartily applauded risks taken to serve people in human need even when those risks resulted in serious mistakes.

IV DISCIPLINES OF EVANGELISM AND WITNESS

A. Definitions:

Let us begin by a simple definition of an evangelist and a witness. An evangelist is one who brings the gospel to others. A witness is one who testifies by act or word to the truth of the gospel. As a matter of fact there is no such thing as a "professional" evangelist in the biblical record. Every person who believes in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord is called to be an evangelist and a witness...

B. Evangelism:

Evangelism is the sharing of the converting Word-the gospel that converts a person from living apart from God to a life living in communion with God.

If Wesley's contention that Christ died for all and not simply for the elect is true, then the call to evangelism is both broad and crucial. There is a danger in contemporary evangelism which has limited its activity to the "Churched". Wesley firmly believed that evangelism should try to reach the entire population since Christ cared for all the lost. Wesley's methods are still viable for he concentrated on the idiom and the needs of those addressed. Such a wholistic emphasis is badly needed in a world such as ours today. Being honestly open to the working of the Holy Spirit, Wesley knew no limits of socio-economic class.

C. Local and Church Evangelism:

Wesley believed that the needs of the person, family and the society must be emphasized ahead of the needs of the Church for growth. It was also Wesley's experience that converted lay persons made the most powerful evangelists. They were powerful communicators because of their experience in Jesus Christ. They could listen or speak in the action patterns as well as thought patterns of their day. This system was looked upon as breaking tradition at a time when Church polity reserved both preaching and evangelism exclusively to clergymen. At a time such as this, Wesley stunned the Church leadership by using lay persons for the task of

evangelism. Wesley found that when God converts a person everything changes. A new life is born. No one is bothered when conversion is only discussed (so it was in the days of Oxford club). Methodist evangelism resulting in conversions had consequential impact on the secular world with revolutionary effect. Wesley, for example, went among the mine workers not because he had read about their needs, but because God had called him to serve all people. He assumed that if a man's soul was saved, fundamental social change would inevitably follow. Wesley's evangelism encouraged each other to love and good works. So it was that reform in social life which was incidental, but also inevitable. Wesley was more concerned with changing lives. He organized the converted immediately into societies which made extensive demands of spiritual, intellectual and more discipline.

In the context of a local Church, Wesley also gave authority and responsibility to laity according to the witness of scripture. Wesley had taught his followers that if people responded to the gospel that was a bonus-not the essential! There are many stories in Wesley's journals that describe his preaching in town squares without people present at the beginning of the sermons. He trusted God to provide audience.

D: A voluntary movement:

Wesley encouraged purely a voluntary movement. He believed that the theory that people must be hired to propagate the gospel is fundamentally erroneous. J Tremayne Copplestone observed that if Whatcoat and Asbury had landed in the United States prepared to hire preachers to propagate Methodist doctrines among the colonists, the work never would have spread as it did. As it was then, we must prepare people to offer their volunteer labour whose hearts are set on fire with the love of Christ.

V SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR INDIVIDUALS

A. Spiritual formation:

John Wesley's entire plan of spiritual formation i.e., gathering the new converts into bands, cells, societies and conferences grew out of his conviction that there could be no isolated or solitary Christian. A person according to Wesley, could not be formed spiritually, apart from the corporate community of the Church. This

was certainly not a monastic retreat of withdrawal from the pressures of the world, but forming an inner spiritual strength which enabled the values of love and justice to be sustained in the world. Wesley called that process, where spiritual disciplines and disciplined ethical living came together - Sanctification. To him, this theological word described true purpose or goal, of human life. Built on justification, which opens the way to conversion, sanctification is the process of spiritual formation. For Wesley justification implied what God does for us through His Son; sanctification is what He works in us by His Spirit. This sanctification as the process of formation which brings people spiritually alive, brings the assurance that God accepts the believer as a parent accepts a child.

B. Context of Spiritual Formation:

Wesley insisted that spiritual formation was to be accomplished in the real world. Right here and now. He insisted that spiritual formation was corporate, not an individual process. The spiritual formation was not an end in itself, but the means of discipleship. This formation is not the prerogative of a few so called spiritual people, but must be accomplished by all God's people without exception. This spiritual formation depended upon a commitment to Jesus Christ alone, not on any particular dogma or doctrine. This must take place in inclusive groups. Wesley involved heterogeneous people in groups of spiritual formation. Women as well as men; the poor as well as the rich; the nobility as well as the commoner; the old as well as the young; the weak as well as the strong; the excriminal as well as the aristocrat; the uneducated as well as the oxford don; the black as well as the white; the Roman catholic as well as the Moravian and the Anglican as well as the Calvinist. The affirmation was that the Holy Spirit brings people together and never separates one from the other.

VI A FORWARD LOOK-21ST CENTURY

As Wesley who considered himself both orthodox and reformed in outlook, the Church must be so to face the challenges of the new millennium.

A. The Evangelist:

Renewal became possible for Wesley because he made the great breadth of the Christian experience his own

inheritance. Salvation had a NOW aspect for Wesley. His theological investigations, therefore, accentuated the present and not the future.

The fulfillment of missions and Evangelism for the Church will come when believers are faithful to the New Testament, to be formed and shaped by Jesus Christ. This was the experience of those who belonged to the societies of John Wesley. We must admit that not all of his methods are applicable for us today, but Wesley's spiritual power can bring vitality to to-day's and tomorrow's Church. Wesley made Christian ethics and a social gospel part of a life of spiritual devotion. His faithfulness abolished the artificial division between the secular and the sacred.

President Woodrow Wilson summarized Wesley's genius in his brochure, JOHN WESLEY'S PLACE IN HISTORY. "The Church was dead and Wesley awakened it; the poor were neglected and Wesley sought them out; the gospel was shrunken into formulas and Wesley flung it fresh upon the air once more in the speech of common men; the air was stagnant and fetid; he cleared and purified it by speaking always and everywhere the Word of God; and men's spirit responded, leaped at the message, and were made wholesome as they comprehended it". These same possibilities are before us to-day. Wesley's movement was not built upon a man's genius. Wesley himself considered it "a vessel unto honour, sanctified, meet of the master's use." (II Timothy 2:21)

B. The Revolutionist:

John Wesley was an extremely cautious revolutionary. He rarely acted impulsively, but once convinced that he was following the will of God, nothing could stop him. If he were alive, that would be his criterion today. The Church in our time, must once again become the Church of the people, as in the New Testament. Wesley was always positive-made up of essentially plain statements from Bible and tradition in order to serve practically the needs of the world parish. His theology, his approach were practical in that they were pastoral. The Church should live with the same simplicity, poverty and all sorts of struggle. A Church which is enslaved to the structures of social compromise cannot be free to serve all people. A Church which compromises with power and wealth cannot serve the ordinary and the poor. We need a Church to-day which struggles for a new society which will give human

beings their god given dignity and make love and justice possible.' The Wesleyan heritage is of great value to every denomination-but we as Methodists have his heritage as our inheritance.

CONCLUSION

Wesley does not have to be updated to be relevant. It is the spirit of the man that communicates, not just his method. He was a man of destiny but never more than a man. He was directed and sustained by the example of a life time of influences, especially Taylor, a Kempis, Law and others whose piety had been won after years of conflict, and whose whole-hearted devotion to God had persisted through years of painful yet rewarding experience. The result was a man equipped to instruct those in unavoidable ignorance, to encourage those indulge in sin, and to exhort those who responded to that exalted and attainable perfection. Wesley was both a practical man and a visionary.

From the historical angle he belongs to the whole of Christendom, for the last of the great ecclesiastical organizations to have come into being in the development of Christianity originated from him. His is not just the life-story of a great organizer and ideologist. This is the story of a spiritual struggle-of a man whose burning desire was to commit his entire life to God. Wesley was influenced by many forces of history-the Reformation's renewed emphasis on justification by faith, Anglicanasim's liturgy and richness of private devotion, Puritanism's stress on ethical introspection through a sensitive conscience, and Moravian Pietism's assurance of faith as seen both in their theology and their hymns.

Needless to say, Mission is both a continuing responsibility of the faithful and a necessary prerequisite for Christian service in each generation. For us who are interested in mission to-day, Wesley is still the most significant figure. The condition of the world to-day and the problems of the contemporary Church are remarkably similar to what they were in Wesley's time. His experience, fears and even his limitations are relevant to-day. During his life time the French Revolution, the American Revolution, and Industrial Revolution took place. A survey of his world shows essential similarity between it and the twentieth century. The twentyfirst may not be any different.

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