

# The Church, the Means of Grace in the World

## - Wesleyan Ecclesiology in an Age of Crisis

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### I. Introduction

The church has always experienced change throughout history. Due to the pressure and tension demanding change according to the demands of the times, the church has questioned its own identity and essence throughout history and has also struggled to maintain mission to and within the world. The church sought to continue to fulfill its role and mission in the world by presenting the relevance of its essence and function to the present era.

Christians believe that God created the church and is still in it. While Christian believers emphasize the divine church, they cannot deny that the church still exists in time and space. The church has a history just like any other human institution, society, or state. Hans Küng clearly emphasized the historicity of the church in his famous book *The Church* (1967). According to Küng, when we deal with the “essence” of the church, it is not a matter of dealing with something metaphysically or theologically unchanging. The church exists only as a continuously changing historical “form,” so if we want to know the essence of the church, we must look at the continuously changing historical form of the church.<sup>1</sup> This means that the essence of the church can only be understood within the actual church that was formed at a specific time in history and exists in a specific form. The church exists in history and has a mission within it. Wesley's Methodism also emerged in a historical form in the 18th-century English society.

With the advent of the so-called post-Christian era, the decline in church membership and the weakening of Christian institutions have caused many people to feel a sense of crisis about the future of the church. Additionally, the current church crisis caused by the pandemic requires a new form of church. In the rapidly changing situation of an age of crisis, how should the church understand its own essence and function?

Determining one's ecclesiology bears a methodological similarity to determining one's ethical perspective. What one does in practice reveals what one holds actually in theory. Just as what one does derives from what one is, so the church's actions derive from what the church considers itself to be. As mentioned earlier, we can understand the essence and function of the church only within its historical form. This paper examines Wesley's ecclesiology by exploring his Methodism which appeared in a historical form in the 18th century.

This paper introduces John Wesley's ecclesiology and how it is valid and useful even in an

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Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 4-5.

age of crisis today. There are a time gap of more than two centuries and a geographical and cultural gap between Wesley and us. We cannot simply go beyond these gaps and apply John Wesley's ecclesiology to today's church. However, despite the differences in time and space, Wesley's ecclesiology seeing the church as a means of grace in the world is still relevant and beneficial to us today. This study seeks to prove this by approaching it from a historical, theological perspective. Furthermore, this study suggests what the church and Methodism should do today by examining what the church is and what Methodism is.

## II. Wesley's Ecclesiology

What is the church? Wesley himself once commented of the word "church" that "[a] more ambiguous word than this . . . is scarce to be found in the English language. It is sometimes taken for a building set apart for public worship, sometimes for a congregation or body of people united together in the service of God."<sup>2</sup> But few understand what they talk of.

Wesley never admitted that what he was building himself was a Church. The early Methodists were not a church in the beginning, but a group of societies belonging to the Church of England. They did not need their own doctrine of the church. In that sense, Albert C. Outler cautiously asserted that Methodists in the beginning "had no distinctive doctrine of the church."<sup>3</sup>

John Wesley unlike John Calvin did not undertake a systematic compilation of his theology or ecclesiology." This was not because he lacked theological understanding. The purpose of his theology was not to develop an elaborate Christian truth system or to defend this truth through apologetics, but to develop a theology for believers living in the world and to help them to put it into practice. Wesley usually shared his theology with his audience in the pulpit, and his writings were directed not only to theologians or clergy, but to all Christian readers. He refrained from all elaborate philosophical speculation or complicated reasoning. He did not try to show knowledge but made "plain account for plain people" as his theological methodology. Such a popularity or practicality of his theology led him to write works that help ordinary people believe and live the Christian message rather than writings of elaborate systematic theology.

Nevertheless, it can't be rightly said that Wesley never possessed his own unique ecclesiology. There have been scholars who argue that Wesley had his ecclesiology. J. E. Rattenbury held that Wesley's ecclesiology, like his brother's, remained essentially Anglican, and that the Wesleys had the view of the Church of England as "a divinely instituted

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<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, Sermon "Of the Church," I, 1, in *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Vols. I-IV. *Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984-), vol. iii, 46. Hereinafter cited as Wesley, *Works*.

<sup>3</sup> Albert C. Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?" in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, eds. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 212.

organization, endowed with a sacerdotal ministry, which received its authorization by direct succession from the Apostles.”<sup>4</sup> This means that his ecclesiology was close to the ecclesiology of the Catholic Church or the high church tradition in the Church of England. John Deschner proposed that Wesley had one, but that it was basically the New Testament understanding of the church.<sup>5</sup> Howard A. Snyder suggested parallels between the Anabaptists and Wesley on the doctrine of the church as a functional or missional reality, and, in doing so, he stressed Wesley’s free-church ecclesiology.<sup>6</sup> Frank Baker believed that “throughout his adult life Wesley responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm to two fundamentally different views of the church”: catholic and free church.<sup>7</sup> Colin W. Williams suggested that Wesley held together three interpretations of the church: the Catholic, the Classical Protestant, and the Free Church.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough passages can be found in Wesley’s many writings which support either one or all of these interpretations. Wesley’s ecclesiology was “an interesting amalgam.”<sup>9</sup> Wesley’s ecclesiology was a combination of various traditions, and for that reason, many claim Wesley as their own.<sup>10</sup>

But, despite the multifaceted feature of Wesley’s ecclesiology, it is true that the Wesleyan movement (or Methodism) in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was understood primarily as a particular mission within the structure of the Church of England. Many of Wesley’s views on the church were close to those of Anglicanism of the eighteenth century, and he argued for ecclesiology in an Anglican manner. Wesley was often inclined to quote Article XIX, “Of the Church,” from the Anglican 39 Articles: “The visible Church of the Christ is a Congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ’s Ordinance.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout his life, Wesley continued to hold to this Article XIX of the Church of England.

This definition of the church combines a view of ‘what the church is’ with ‘what the church does.’ That is to say, the nature of the church IS ‘a congregation of faithful people,’ and the actions of the church are ‘preaching the true Word of God and administering the Sacraments duly.’ This definition provides the traditional principles for Wesley’s adopted ecclesiology.

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<sup>4</sup> J. E. Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns* (London: Epworth Press, 1941), 229.

<sup>5</sup> John Deschner, “Methodism’s Thirteenth Article,” *Perkins School of Theology Journal* 13 (Winter 1960): 13.

<sup>6</sup> See Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 137.

<sup>8</sup> Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 141f.

<sup>9</sup> Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?,” 214.

<sup>10</sup> For the multiple traditions which influenced on Wesley’s ecclesiology, see Gwang Seok Oh, *John Wesley’s Ecclesiology: A Study in its Sources and Development* (Lanham: Scare Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England by Gilbert, Bishop of Sarum*, ed. James R. Page (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1866), 233. Obviously, this Article XIX was informed by the Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. Cf. “The Augsburg Confession” in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), vol. iii, 11-12. In that sense, Wesley’s ecclesiology was close to the classical Protestant interpretation which emphasized the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments as essential marks of the church.

But this traditional Protestant ecclesiology is somewhat limited in its conception of itself as a congregation of faithful people who worship together hearing the Word and participating in the Sacrament. Most churches consider themselves as more than just a worshiping community. Talking about the visible church as “a congregation of the faithful” which worship together hearing the Word and participating in the Sacrament, in practice Wesley thought of “the fellowship of believers,” a slightly more radical and free-church ecclesiology. The more radical view is implied in much of Wesley’s practice within Methodism. A Representative example is his recognition and use of lay preachers.

Wesley’s principles do not always correlate precisely with his practice. His praxis took into account many contemporary cultural contextual conditions not necessarily anticipated by the framers of particular standards of doctrine, such as the 39 Articles. Wesley always managed to find out those practices to need specific needs of the time.

In my view, Wesley’s ministry placed priority on saving souls, and he had a practical and functional understanding of ecclesiology that is controlled and justified by the need of a specific situation. This pragmatic understanding of church became a principal of the Methodist ecclesiology. Part of Wesley’s genius lay in his pragmatism.

### III. Wesley and Methodism

To be a member of the Church of England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one had to subscribe the 39 Articles as the list of their own beliefs. One could not vote, attend university, hold public office, or generally participate fully in the civic life of the nation without subscribing the Articles. But Wesley had no subsidiary list of beliefs that were required of Methodists in order to join the movement. All that people had to profess in order to join a Methodist society was a “desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.”<sup>12</sup>

To fulfill the simple desire, Methodist members were required to follow three rules specifically: avoid evil in every kind, do good of every possible sort to all people, and attend upon all the ordinances of God (that is, use the means of grace whenever possible).<sup>13</sup> True religion entails more than being a good person, avoiding evil, and going to Church, but it cannot exist without them. These represent the minimal expectations of a person aspiring to be a Christian.

These requirements for joining and maintaining one’s Methodist status do not imply a doctrinal test but rather a soteriological focus with present implications. That is to say, Methodism had a basic soteriological intent with specific expectations of the believer, including one’s constant attention to using the means of grace. This soteriological focus was spelled out clearly by Wesley’s statement in the Large Minutes of 1763, in answer to the question, “What was the purpose of God in raising up the Methodist preachers?” Wesley stated,

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<sup>12</sup> Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” in *Wesley, Works*, vol. ix, 79.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

“To reform the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”<sup>14</sup> The well-known answer has been often repeated by Methodists in every cultural context. Earlier in 1745, Wesley presented the same focus in different terms, listing his rules for the Methodist preachers: “You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those who want you, but to those who want you most.”<sup>15</sup> Wesley spent much time focusing the work of the leadership of Methodism into what he considered the most efficient and effective possible organization to meet its soteriological goals.

We should remember at this point that Wesley’s expectations for Methodism were not separate from his expectations for the Church of England or other Churches. Actually, in answer to the question, “what is the defining mark of a Methodist?” he stated that the Methodist is one who loves God and loves his neighbor. But aren’t these the normal expectations of all Christians? Yes. What Wesley is saying is that the genuine Methodist is simply a real Christian. The Methodist “obeys the Great Commandment, by loving God and neighbor. Methodists **actually** do it.”<sup>16</sup>

Love of God and love of neighbor become evident in the life of the church through two basic avenues: Love of God through works of piety (worship, devotion) and love of neighbor through works of mercy (social concern). These are not to be understood as simply activities of individual Christians. Wesley recognized no solitary religion and no solitary holiness. Methodism is sometimes misunderstood as maintaining a focus on individual piety or individual holiness. But this is not Wesleyan. Wesley coined the term “social holiness” in order to counteract this misunderstanding of religion as simply individual piety. “The gospel of Christ,” says he, “knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness. ‘Faith working by love’ is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. . . . he who loves God [should] love his brother also . . . we manifest our love ‘by doing good unto all men.’”<sup>17</sup> This statement is a very good summary of Wesley’s ecclesiology.

#### IV. The Church as the Means of Grace

The most basic element of Wesley’s ecclesiology is a focus on God’s grace. When we say “grace,” what are we actually talking about? We use the term with great facility but with little actual understanding. It is often used in such a way as to imply some gift that God presents us to help cure problems or help us through hard times, such as medicine or health diet supplement. But grace is not a substance or a thing. Grace is relational. It is God’s relationship with us, his activity in our lives, grounded in his loving attributes that are directed toward us.

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<sup>14</sup> Wesley, *Works*, vol. x, 845.

<sup>15</sup> Wesley, *Works*, vol. x, 159.

<sup>16</sup> Wesley, *Works*, vol. ix, 32-46.

<sup>17</sup> John Wesley, *Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: 1739), par. 5.

Wesley puts it very succinctly: grace “means that power of God the Holy Ghost which ‘worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.’”<sup>18</sup>

Grace is God’s presence (or power) active in our lives. God’s presence is always experienced as power of some sort or other. The grace of God, the presence or power of God works in our lives to inform, convict, liberate, and strengthen us.

God has ordained certain ways in which human beings can reliably receive God’s grace. Wesley called these ways the means of grace. We experience God in our lives in two main categories: instituted means and prudential means. The instituted means are those traditional works of piety instituted by Christ and the church through which we are brought into the presence of God: worship, the Lord’s Supper, fasting, and prayer. These are the experiences that most Christians consider when they think of the “means of grace.” But there are many more experiences through which we come into the presence of God. Wesley refers to these as “prudential” means of grace, including those works of mercy through which we can experience the power of God in our lives, as Christians, as Methodists, as preachers, and as leaders. A few examples of these prudential means of grace are 1) as Christians, following the arts of holy living, 2) as Methodists, attending class and band meetings regularly, 3) as preachers, meeting every society, leaders, and bands, and 4) as assistants (leaders), executing every part of your office.<sup>19</sup>

To these examples of prudential means of grace, we could add many other ways that people experience the presence and power of God: studying, teaching, preaching, singing, visiting the poor, the sick, the prisoners, and the elderly, etc. When you visit the poor, Christ will go with you. Such visiting will be a means of grace to you as well as to them, for Christ will go with you to them. The presence or power of God will become known in your experience.

Methodism is designed by Wesley to help people experience the presence of God in their lives in many different ways. Both the organization and the program of their mission are designed with this purpose in mind. The organization of small groups in the Methodist societies, the classes and various kinds of bands, were designed to encourage prayer, bible study, confession, and other works of piety to supplement the instituted means of grace found in the Church (the Sacraments). The activities of the Methodist societies also promote the prudential means of grace, seen in preaching, studying, helping the poor, visiting the sick, etc.

When we say that the Methodists helped the poor, we must remember that about two-thirds of the Methodists themselves were poor. The Methodists had a major task simply in taking care of the poor in their own societies. The one fact that is not often noticed is that about 4 percent of the members of the Methodist societies were in the highest economic level of society as a whole. Namely, they were the rich. This percentage represents about twice as high a proportion as found in society in general. So, when Wesley talks about collecting food, money, or clothing for the poor, he is talking about those of the Methodists who had the means of providing these

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<sup>18</sup> Wesley, Sermon “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” in *Wesley, Works*, vol. i, 309.

<sup>19</sup> *Wesley, Works*, vol. x, 923-924.

materials if they would give of their means to those who could not afford them. Helping the poor is the task of the rich in the societies. However, Wesley's well-known rule as to money—gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can—was further applied in such a way that anyone was responsible for helping anyone else who was worse off than they, no matter how rich or poor they were. This approach was a way to express a communal approach to social problems, both within the Methodist societies and in the larger society.<sup>20</sup>

The list of activities that Wesley organized shows that these are not just individual efforts. They include a whole program of institutional programs such as medical clinics, loan programs, schools for children, subsidized housing for widows and orphans. These are community works of mercy, organized by Methodists, first for their own members but also for other people in the larger society of the time. In this very real way, Wesley's view of holiness, love of God and love of neighbor, works of piety and works of mercy, using the means of grace, becomes embodied in Methodism. He views Methodism as the place where the Church can experience the grace, presence, power of God. Thus, Methodism itself became a means of grace, a religious community in which people could experience the power and presence of God's love. In that sense, furthermore, the Church itself is a means of grace in which people could experience the power and presence of God. That is what the Church was intended to be. Wesley saw Methodism itself as means by which God's presence could become more vital in the lives of individuals, in the fellowship of believers, in the Church, and in the Nation or the world. Therefore, Methodism can be seen as a movement organized to be a collective means of grace to members and to the world.

## V. Wesleyan Ecclesiology in an Age of Crisis

The church in an age of crisis today is forced to face changes and will also undergo major changes. Accordingly, we need a new form of the church.

When Hans Küng said in his book *The Church*, "our concept of the Church is basically influenced by the form of the Church at any given time," he was right. The "essence" of the church is not a matter of metaphysical or theological stasis but exists only in constantly changing historical "forms." Therefore, if we want to discover the essence of the church, we must look at the constantly changing historical forms of the church.<sup>21</sup> This means that the essence of the church can be grasped only in the specific form of the church that exists at any given time in history.

Wesley's Methodism also emerged in a historical form in the 18th-century English society. His ecclesiology was formed under the influence of the various traditions that preceded him and especially the Church of England. Wesley learned the concept of the means of grace from the Church of England. Methodism did not emerge from a theory of the nature of the church

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2002), 15-38.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Küng, *The Church*, 4-5.

but emerged in a historical form.

The present institutional form of the church is also a product of modernity. The present organizational forms of the church originate at specific times and places. In terms of organization, modernity put stress on certainty, predictability, efficiency, and top-down centralization to bring rational order to all aspects of human life.<sup>22</sup> This brought back the centralizing institutional and bureaucratic structures of the present Methodist Church.

However, with the advent of the so-called post-Christian era in the West, declining church membership and eroding strength of Christian institutions make many people feel a sense of crisis about the future of the church in such contexts. In addition to it, the church crisis today caused by the pandemic demands a new form of the church.

Forms can change. Methodism has also changed over time from movement to church and from society to congregation. However, the change comes with tension. Such a tension stands out above all in matters of worship. The traditional Protestant ecclesiology that the church should be a congregation of believers which worship together hearing the Word and participating in the Sacrament creates tension today in the times when contactless worship services, whether voluntarily or otherwise, are forced. The word “congregation” means “gathering together.” Traditionally, churches have gathered together as a community for worship, and through that worship service, they have a complete fellowship. However, the pandemic situation demands change for the church based on gathering together. In an online worship service, the fellowship of believers is interrupted or very limited. Especially those unfamiliar with such media can be excluded from the online worship service. Particularly difficult is the sacramental issue. How can you baptize and receive the Lord’s Supper in the online worship service? Obviously, this is an issue that requires a lot of discussion.<sup>23</sup>

However, here again we must remember that the form of the church can change and has changed according to the times and circumstances. I think that the church today needs to restore Wesley's ecclesiology, where the church or Methodism is regarded as a means of grace. What the church does can depend on historical circumstances. There are many means of grace by which the church makes people experience the presence of God. Depending on how we use it, online media can also be a means of grace. The church is a place where you can experience God's grace, presence, and power through instituted and prudential means of grace. The church itself is a means of grace.

As the church’s actions derive from what the church considers itself to be, the definition of the church as a means of grace determines what the church does. According to Wesley, the church and Christians do only two works: works of piety and works of mercy. We attain personal holiness through works of piety and social holiness through works of mercy. Wesley's

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<sup>22</sup> For the institutional forms of the modern church as a product of modernity, see Kyle R. Tau, “Toward an Ecosystem of Unity: Ecumenism and Ecclesiology in the Postmodern Era, A United Methodist Appraisal,” *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies* 9 (2017), 3-7.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Haejung Park, “A Study about Online Worship in Corona Virus 19,” *Theology and the World*, vol. 98 (2020), 175-216.



theology emphasizes holiness, and he described the mission of Methodism as: "to spread scriptural holiness over the land."

Interestingly, Wesley's understanding of holiness was very beneficial in the recent pandemic situation. Wesley emphasized that the holiness of the soul is closely related to the cleanliness of the body, and that this holistic cleanliness should always appear in everyday life in practical forms such as the cleanliness of body, clothing, and home.<sup>24</sup> In his sermon "On Dress" Wesley says, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness."<sup>25</sup> The stress on hygiene and cleanliness is one of Wesley's theological and medical features. The daily works of cleaning the body and surroundings have a religious meaning, and spiritual religion comes into the everyday life through daily routines that clean matter.

Wesley studied medicine and physic with great interest in curing the prevalent diseases at the time, and published a book entitled *Primitive Physic* to help people.<sup>26</sup> Also, religious people at that time were able to provide medical help as a form of pastoral care, and the Methodist organization was well organized with an organic system of caring for the congregation by middle leaders. Using his book and Methodist organization, Wesley worked for individual health and public health and worked at the fore in treating public diseases. Mission and healing in the Methodist ministry were together, because Wesley saw making a better world as a mission.

What the church and the Wesleyans should concern in an age of crisis is the works of mercy. The crisis caused by the pandemic and the economic crisis it brought about reveal the full force of unjust structures that place poor people at great risk. The pandemic caused by the coronavirus has been accompanied by severe economic setbacks, including surging unemployment, sharp declines in income and the collapse of businesses. As the pandemic spreads to less-developed countries, its effects on the global poor will likely be even greater. There are over 828 million people living in extreme poverty in the world today.<sup>27</sup> They are very vulnerable to the diseases. The church can and should provide leadership in responding to the needs of people in absolute poverty. The church does not exist for itself, but for the salvation of the world. It is the Wesleyan (or Methodist) spirit.

Perhaps another research paper should be written to address the issue of how churches under the Wesleyan tradition can specifically provide leadership for the socially disadvantaged and the salvation of the world in an age of crisis. There will be many programs that can be

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<sup>24</sup> Deborah Madden, *A Cheap, Safe and Natural Medicine* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Wesley, Sermon "On Dress," in *Wesley, Works*, vol. iii, 249.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. John Wesley, *Primitive Physic, or an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases* (Philadelphia: Printed by Prichard & Hall, Sold by John Dickins, 1789),

<sup>27</sup> This figure is a statistic based on the 'The 2022 edition of The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI)' published by the United Nations (UN) on July 7, 2022. 828 million people correspond to approximately 10% of the world's population. According to the report, the number of people suffering from food shortages and poverty worldwide in 2021 increased by 150 million compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "UN Report: Global hunger numbers rose to as many as 828 million in 2021," <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/un-report-global-hunger-SOFI-2022-FAO/en>.

proposed not only at the ecclesiological level, but also at the social and missionary level, and it is difficult to cover them together in this short paper. Above all, the purpose of this study is to use a historical approach to suggest that Wesleyan ecclesiology is not a past model that is unsuitable for today but is still valid and beneficial today.

Ecclesiology is not simply a theory that theologians analyze intellectually or a statement made for church-centered creedal purposes. Ecclesiology deals with the practices and activities carried out throughout history by the church which is both a saved community and a saving community. Wesley's Methodism emerged in an age of societal instability that was in crisis through violence, war, poverty and discrimination. In the eighteenth-century societal crises, Wesley's Methodism was a means of grace by which people in crises experience the reality of God's love.

In Wesleyan ecclesiology, the church is a place where one can experience God's grace, presence, and power. Furthermore, the church itself is a means of grace established to enable greater experiences of God's grace, presence, and power in the lives of individuals, among believers, among society, the nation, and the whole world. The church exists for the salvation of the world. A person and a community who experience God's grace, God's presence and power through the church fulfill the mission of saving the world. This ecclesiology is still valid and beneficial even in an age of crisis today.