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***What's Unique About a Wesleyan Theology of Mission?***  
**A Wesleyan Perspective on Free Methodist Missions**

**INTRODUCTION**

The following two remarkable quotations from John Wesley go to the heart of his theology and illustrate the key points to be made in this paper:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) *preventing grace*; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning, his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by *convincing grace*, usually in Scripture termed *repentance*; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the Proper Christian salvation: whereby, “through grace,” we “are saved by faith;” consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favor of God, by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God. All experience, as well as Scripture, show this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment, as “a grain of mustard seed, which, at first, is the least of all seeds,” but afterwards puts forth large branches, and becomes a great tree; till, in another instant, the heart is cleansed from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we “grow up in all things into Him that is our head;” till we attain “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” —John Wesley, Sermon 75, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” II.1.

We may learn from hence, in the Third place, what is the proper nature of religion, of the religion of Jesus Christ. It is *qerapeia yuchvß* [therapy of soul], God’s method of *healing a soul* which is thus diseased. Hereby the great Physician of souls applies medicines to heal this sickness, to restore human nature, totally corrupted in all its faculties. God heals all our Atheism by the knowledge of Himself, and of Jesus Christ whom he hath sent; by giving us faith, a divine evidence and conviction of God, and of the things of God. — in particular, of this important truth, “Christ loved me, and gave himself for *me*.” By repentance and lowliness of heart, the deadly disease of pride is healed; that of self-will by resignation, a meek and thankful submission to the will of God; and for the love of the world in all its branches, the love of God is the sovereign remedy. Now, this is properly religion, “faith” thus “working by love;” working the genuine meek humility, entire deadness to the world, with a loving, thankful acquiescence in, and conformity to, the whole will and word of God. —John Wesley, Sermon 44, “Original Sin,” III.3.

This reflection on a Wesleyan theology of mission assumes several basic things: That God calls the church into mission; that the church is essentially missionary, or missional; that the gospel of Jesus Christ is powerful to reach across cultural barriers and to draw people to himself despite human sinfulness. It assumes also that any sound theology of mission, including any purportedly Wesleyan one, must be thoroughly biblical; that biblical authority takes precedence over the authority of Wesley or any church tradition.

It is also my conviction, however, that John Wesley had an unusually insightful grasp of the gospel and its mission. The Wesleyan perspective is highly relevant to the mission of the Free Methodist Church today. Much of this relevance comes from the fact that Wesley was constantly engaged in the *practice* of mission—preaching the gospel to the poor and all who would hear; forming Methodist classes and societies; writing letters, sermons, and pamphlets; counseling and sending out preachers; and constantly reflecting theologically on what he was doing. Wesley was amazingly well informed about what was going on in his day intellectually, philosophically, and scientifically, as well as in the church and in the lives of the Methodist people who were his special concern.

Wesley's missionary focus, of course, was primarily Great Britain and the American colonies. He believed in establishing a vital base and then moving out gradually from that base, and thus extended the Methodist witness throughout England and into Scotland, Ireland, and America. The real father of *global* Methodist missions was his younger protégé Thomas Coke (1747-1814), who is worth studying in his own right. Wesley and Coke had different strategies, though the same overall mission. Wesley said wryly of Coke's globe-trotting missionary ventures, "Dr. Coke and I are like the French and the Dutch. The French have been compared to a flea, the Dutch to a louse. I creep like a louse, and the ground I get I keep; but the Doctor leaps like a flea and is sometimes obliged to leap back again."

Through the influence of Wesley and Coke and others, an amazing Methodist missionary enterprise developed in the 1800s. It was double-pronged, reaching in separate branches from British and American Methodism. In the United States, Methodist missions began with missions to the American Indians, the slaves, and to the west coast. American Methodist missions were expanding rapidly at the time B. T. Roberts was beginning his ministry, which is part of the reason Roberts briefly considered missionary service in Bulgaria or in the Oregon Territory.

John Wesley's own life and theology, however, are the fountainhead of the Methodist missionary enterprise. And they provide highly significant learnings that can and should instruct Free Methodist missions.

## **THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF WESLEY'S THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION**

We need first to understand the distinctiveness of Wesley's theological orientation. Wesley had a remarkable capacity to step outside his own tradition when doing theology — unlike, for example, Luther or Calvin. This was due in part to his personality and temperament and the nature of his intellect; in part to the hybrid Anglican tradition with its *via media* and its "Anglican triad" of Scripture, reason, and tradition; and in part to the revival in patristic studies at Oxford during Wesley's student days. Perhaps it owed something also to Wesley's willingness to step outside his own social class to minister to and with the poor.

I believe God used these dynamics to create what is increasingly coming to be recognized as one of the great theological minds of the Christian tradition—as well as a great evangelist, church leader, and man of mature Christian character.

The two points of distinctiveness I would highlight in Wesley's theology are, first, his broad, conjunctive approach (“both/and” rather than “either/or,” but with no compromise on issues of truth and error); and his integration of multiple sources of truth (but with no compromise on biblical authority).

1. Wesley's broad approach to theology. Unlike most of his theological contemporaries and forebears, Wesley drew from other traditions besides Reformed Protestantism. Most importantly for the whole cast of his theology, he reached back prior to Augustine (whose theology heavily shaped Calvin and Luther) and drew from the early sources of Eastern Orthodoxy. Central here is Wesley's view of grace, of human nature, and of the nature and scope of salvation. Wesley had a key theological intuition that affirmations which appeared contradictory or paradoxical might simply testify to a deeper, integrating truth that needed to be discerned.<sup>1</sup>

2. The Wesleyan Pentilateral. Much has been written about the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience — which, however, might better be termed the Wesleyan Pentilateral of Scripture, creation, reason, tradition, and experience. It is clear that for Wesley, God's creation was a source of revelation, truth, and insight. Wesley integrated all these elements into his theology. The construct probably is best viewed as a sphere or circle, or a structure like that of the atom, with Scripture at the center and creation, reason, tradition, and experience orbiting around this center—all “energized” and made dynamic by the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

These interrelated dynamics—Wesley's broad but biblically-based theology and his holistic integration of multiple sources—give rise to several theological themes of importance for Christian mission. I have chosen to highlight four that I think are very basic in Wesley and are especially relevant today.

## FOUR KEY THEMES IN WESLEY

Wesley emphasized four *biblical* themes that together constitute a dynamic theology of mission. These are *the image of God* in humankind (and to a lesser degree in all creation), God's *preceding* (or *prevenient*) *grace*, *salvation as healing*, and *the perfecting of Christian character* (Christian perfection). Though these themes interweave, they have a certain logical and to some extent chronological order in the sequence I present them.

### 1. The Image of God

Man and woman are created in God's image. For Wesley, this was more than an affirmation about human worth or dignity (as it is often taken today). It had key redemptive implications. Since human beings bear God's image, even though marred by sin, they can be

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<sup>1</sup> I summarize this as “The Wesleyan Synthesis,” chap. 11 of *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Luís Wesley de Souza, “‘The Wisdom of God in Creation’: Mission and the Wesleyan Pentilateral,” in Howard A. Snyder, ed., *Global Good News: Mission in a New Context* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 138-152; Howard A. Snyder, “Is all Truth God's Truth?” *Spring Arbor University Journal* 25:3 (Fall 2001), 4-6.

redeemed, healed, restored. Created in the divine image, men and women are “capable of God.” That is, they have an inherent capacity for deep communion and companionship with God if the effects of sin can be overcome.

Among other implications, this means that the first word in evangelistic witness is not bad news but good news: Not, “You are a sinner,” but “You bear God’s image.” Evangelism starts with good news. But Wesley does not lose his balance here, as some contemporary theology does; there is no compromise with the sinfulness of sin and the alienation, guilt, and judgment that result from sin. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). For Wesley, that is neither the last *nor the first* word. Sin is the defacing, but not the total loss, of the image of God. In every person there is something worth saving and something that can be restored.

In a more remote sense, the whole created order bears God’s stamp and image. Here Wesley’s worldview is more Hebraic and biblical than Greek or Platonic; more ecological, “both/and,” than is most Reformed theology. In his mature theology, especially, Wesley did not make a sharp break between the physical and the spiritual realms. It was no theological embarrassment to him to see the interpenetration of the material and the spiritual worlds, and to affirm the working of God’s Spirit in both, interactively. This provides (in part) the theological basis for recognizing that salvation has to do not only with human experience but also with the restoration of the whole created order (another key theme in Wesley).

## 2. Preceding Grace

In Wesley’s view, all creation is infused or suffused with God’s grace as an unconditional benefit of Christ’s atonement. There is nowhere one can go where God’s grace is not found, though people (and people corporately, as cultures and societies) can, and do, close their hearts and minds to God’s grace.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the Latin *praevenire* (“to come before, anticipate, get the start of”), Wesley called this gracious dynamic “preventing grace”—because that’s what “prevent” still meant in his day. Since “prevent” has almost the opposite meaning and connotation today, the more common term has become “prevenient grace.” We might more accurately call it *preceding grace*—that gracious, loving, drawing action or influence of God that is always at work seeking to bring people and cultures to God.<sup>4</sup>

Several implications of God’s preceding grace might profitably be explored, and we may want to discuss them. The first and most basic meaning is that in Christ by the Holy Spirit God has gone ahead of us (ahead of every person), preceding us, counteracting the effects of sin to the extent that people *can* respond to God’s grace. God’s preceding grace is not in itself saving grace; its function is to draw us to salvation in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, preventing grace.” Wesley, Sermon 75, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” III.4.

<sup>4</sup> Often in Wesley one can use the terms “grace” and “love” interchangeably, with no essential difference of meaning. This says much, of course, about his fundamental conception of God.

<sup>5</sup> There is a sense in which preceding grace may become salvific, Wesley taught, in the case of individuals who have never had opportunity hear of Jesus but who respond in obedience to the (preceding) grace they have

Wesley spoke of *preventing* (preceding), *justifying* (or converting) and *sanctifying* grace.<sup>6</sup> These are not, of course, three different “kinds” or qualities of grace. Grace is one; it is the gracious, loving self-giving activity and influence of God. The threefold distinction refers not so much to the nature of grace itself but to the way people *experience* that grace. By God’s prior grace people are drawn to God (or they resist that grace). Responding in faith, grace becomes justifying grace, leading directly into sanctifying grace if people continue to open their lives to the work of God’s Spirit. Or, put differently, the loving grace of God precedes us, draws us to Christ, converts us, and progressively sanctifies us, leading finally to “glorification” in the new creation.

One missiological implication of preceding grace is that God’s Spirit is the missionary. God is already active in all persons, cultures, societies, and to some in many (not all) religions.<sup>7</sup> God works for good, limiting the effects of evil, and seeking to bring people to himself. While some people, responding to preceding grace, may find their way to God, the role of the church and Christian mission is essential that more people may know and respond to Christ and be saved from their sins, and that vital, outreaching churches may be formed in all societies. The work of Christian mission is so to cooperate with God’s preceding grace that people may experience God’s convicting, justifying, and sanctifying grace.

An emphasis on preceding or prevenient grace can be pressed too far, of course, so that the distinction between *preceding* and *justifying* grace is lost. The danger would be to lose Wesley’s balance; to so emphasize that we are saved by grace, not by works, that the necessity of knowing and responding to God’s grace in Jesus Christ in faith and obedience is eclipsed. The whole point of prevenient grace is that it *precedes* in order that there might be response of repentance, faith, love, and good works.

### 3. Salvation as Healing

A third key element in Wesley’s theology is his conception of salvation as healing from the disease of sin. While people are guilty because of their acts of sin, the deeper problem is a moral disease which alienates people from God, from themselves and each other, and from the physical environment. So Charles Wesley prayed,

The seed of sin’s disease  
Spirit of health, remove,  
Spirit of finished holiness,

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received. Thus Cornelius before Peter’s preaching, though “in the Christian sense . . . then an unbeliever,” was not outside God’s favor. “[W]hat is not exactly according to the divine rule must stand in need of divine favour and indulgence.” Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the NT*, Acts 10:4. Anyone thus saved, however, is saved by Christ’s atonement, even though they are unaware of it. In these cases, then, preceding grace becomes (in effect) saving grace. See Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Kingswood, 1994), 32-34.

<sup>6</sup> “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.” Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” II.1.

<sup>7</sup> Non-Christian religions are not in themselves *means* of grace, but God’s grace to some degree works in them—if in no other way, at least to restrain evil. Presumably most religions are a mixture of good and evil (as Christianity itself can be when it becomes religion). A pagan religion, like an individual person or a culture, may become totally corrupt, but even there God’s grace is at work, to some degree restraining evil, or finally bringing judgment.

## Spirit of perfect love.<sup>8</sup>

Reformed theology has tended to use primarily (or exclusively) juridical models of salvation, with strong emphasis on the Book of Romans. Jesus' atonement cancels the penalty for sin so that we may be forgiven, justified. Wesley affirmed this, of course. But for Wesley the deeper issue was the moral disease of sin that needed healing by God's grace.

Randy Maddox speaks of Wesley's "distinctive integration" of Eastern and Western conceptions of God's grace at this point. "Given their juridical focus, Western theologians have identified God's grace predominately as *pardon*, or the unmerited forgiveness of our guilt through Christ. By contrast, Eastern theologians construe grace primarily in terms of the *power* to heal our infirm nature that comes through participation in God." Wesley combines the two. A study of Wesley's preaching shows that (in contrast, for instance, to Calvin), Wesley combined in almost equal measure the accents of pardon and power in preaching God's grace.<sup>9</sup>

Wesley wrote in his sermon "The Witness of Our Spirit," "As soon as ever the grace of God (in the former sense, his pardoning love) is manifested to our soul, the grace of God (in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit) takes place therein. And now we can perform through God, what to [ourselves] was impossible . . . a recovery of the image of God, a renewal of soul after His likeness."<sup>10</sup> Maddox helpfully summarizes:

Wesley's integration of the two dimensions of grace was not merely a conjunctive one. The emphasis on pardon was incorporated into the larger theme of empowerment for healing. Thereby, God's unmerited forgiveness became instrumental to the healing of our corrupt nature, in keeping with Wesley's deep sympathy with a therapeutic emphasis like that characteristic of Eastern Christianity. At the same time, the Christological basis of grace was made more evident than is typical in the East, integrating the legitimate concern emphasized by the West.<sup>11</sup>

Today "therapeutic" models of salvation are anathema to many Evangelicals because they are thought to undercut the biblical emphasis on the guilt of sin and justification by grace alone. To use healing language for salvation is seen as caving in to popular humanistic psychology, an over-emphasis on "feeling," and today's moral relativism. But we are not faced with an either/or choice here. Pardon for sin through the atoning death of Jesus Christ is essential. But the point of Christ's atonement is that human beings, and by extension their societies, cultures, and environments, may be healed from the disease and alienation of sin.

This has many implications for Christian mission. The healing model underscores the personal and relational nature of salvation. It has the potential for "healing" the divisions between our understandings of spiritual, physical, social-relational, environmental, and cosmic health. God's salvation intends and entails healing in all dimensions. Salvation-as-healing makes it clear that God is intimately concerned with every aspect of our lives; yet,

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Wesley, "Glorious Liberty," Hymn 442 in *The Hymn Book of the Free Methodist Church*, 1883.

<sup>9</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 84f. Maddox cites the dissertation of Robert Hillman which found that in 463 references to grace in 140 of Wesley's sermons, 147 construe grace as pardon (mercy) and 176 as power, and 140 references combine the two dimensions. As Maddox notes, this "two-dimensional understanding of grace" is found also in Charles Wesley's hymns. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 297.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley, Sermon 12, "The Witness of Our Spirit," 15.

<sup>11</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 85.

biblically understood, it also makes clear that the healing we most fundamentally need is spiritual: Our relationship to God.<sup>12</sup> Biblically grounded (and as Wesley understood it), the salvation-as-healing motif is no concession to pop psychology; it is an affirmation of who God is, what it means to be created in God's image, and what it takes for that image to be restored in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The healing paradigm is often especially relevant in mission contexts. As Philip Jenkins notes in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, many African and other independent churches “stress Jesus’ role as prophet and healer, as Great Physician. Although this approach is not so familiar in the modern West, this is one of many areas in which the independents are very much in tune with the Mediterranean Christianity of the earliest centuries.”<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. The Perfecting of Christian Character

Insofar as salvation concerns our relation to God and other people, the goal is Christian perfection, or the maturing and perfecting of Christian character.

Unfortunately, the word “perfection” is easily misunderstood to mean a completed absolute rectitude, even flawlessness, rather than the process of perfecting (though the word can mean both). It is actually closer to Wesley’s meaning to speak of “Christian perfecting” or “the perfecting of Christian character” than to speak of “Christian perfection.”<sup>14</sup> Wesley, of course, was attempting to be biblical in his terminology. It is clear from his writings that by Christian perfection Wesley meant the Spirit-given ability to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind and our neighbors as ourselves. The central issue is the work of the Spirit in transforming us (personally and communally, as the church) into the image of Christ; of forming in us the character of Christ, which is equivalent to the fruit of the Spirit. Christian perfection is having and living out “the fullness of Christ” or “the fullness of the Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

We are called to holiness, which means (as Wesley often said) having the mind that was in Christ Jesus, being conformed to his image, and walking as he walked. This is where the salvation-healing leads, if we walk in the Spirit. This healing makes the church a sign and agent of the larger, broader healing that God is bringing in Christ through the Spirit.

Wesley sometimes called this experience of the perfecting of character “social holiness.” We should be clear that by “social holiness” Wesley meant the experience and demonstration of the character of Jesus Christ *in Christian community*, the church. In Wesley, “social holiness” does not mean social justice or the social witness of the church. That witness grows out of the “social holiness” that is the character of the church itself and might better be called “kingdom witness” or something similar. Wesley was making a very specific and

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Luke 5:20-26, where Jesus both heals and forgives the paralytic.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 116. Jenkins documents the prominence of the healing emphasis in much of emerging global Christianity.

<sup>14</sup> It seems clear to me that the terms “Christian perfection,” “entire sanctification,” and even “holiness” have always been problematic in our tradition, even for many who wish to maintain, with no dilution or compromise, what Wesley taught.

<sup>15</sup> Key passages are Eph. 3:19, 4:13, Col. 2:10, among others, and those that speak of being filled with the Spirit, such as Eph. 5:18.

essential (and often neglected) point in using the term “social holiness”: Holiness (the character of Christ) is not solitary or lone or individualistic sanctity but a social (i.e., relational) experience based on our relationship with God the Trinity and experienced, refined, and lived out jointly in Christian community. Wesley was very clear on this, and it is a disservice to Wesleyan theology to use the term “social holiness” as equivalent to “social witness” without at least acknowledging that we mean something different than Wesley did.<sup>16</sup>

It seems to me that the Wesleyan emphasis on Christian perfecting has two fundamental aspects that are key for the church’s effective witness: First, we must emphasize (and incarnate) the fact that the *goal* (the *telos*) is always growing up into the fullness of the character of Jesus Christ as the corporate experience of the church and the experience of each member of the body. This seems to be the central import of Ephesians 4:7-16 and related passages which speak of the church as the body of Christ, animated by and filled with the Spirit.

Second, we must stress (and help Christians experience) the fullness of the Spirit— being filled with and walking in the Holy Spirit. Normally, as Wesley taught, this deeper work of the Spirit comes as a distinct experience subsequent to conversion, though (as Wesley acknowledged) it may be experienced more gradually or less perceptibly and thus, no doubt, through multiple fresh fillings (or deeper workings) of the Spirit. In today’s stress on character, moral development, and growth we must not lose the essential *crisis and process* link. I agree for the most part with the critique that the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century holiness movement overemphasized crisis and underplayed process in the work of sanctification. But today we probably are in danger of the opposite extreme, partly in reaction to Pentecostal/ Charismatic emphases and partly in reaction to our own history. It would be un-Wesleyan as well as unbiblical to lose the crisis/process nexus.

As a practical matter of preaching, discipleship, and growth, we need to help believers understand the deeper life of the Spirit that is available to them in Christ. We should give believers opportunities to enter into that deeper life—to confront the dividedness of their own hearts and enter into that fullness, wholeness, and integration *in Christian community* that is our inheritance in Jesus Christ and a foretaste of that communion we will enjoy in the heavenly kingdom. This was Wesley’s concern, and it should be ours.

In sum: key Wesleyan themes for Christian mission today are the image of God, preceding grace, salvation as healing, and the perfecting of Christian character. Clearly all these themes are *missional*. That is, they all clarify the mission of the church and by the Spirit empower and impel the church into mission, into kingdom witness.

## WESLEYAN THEOLOGY AND CHURCH GROWTH

The implications of these themes can be drawn out in several directions. They not only suggest a basic theology of mission but also give direction for issues of strategy and methods. Clearly there are social justice implications in all these themes, though I have not addressed them directly.

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<sup>16</sup> “Christianity is essentially a social religion; and that to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed to destroy it. . . . it cannot subsist at all, without society, — without living and conversing with other men.” Wesley, Sermon 24, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse IV,” I.1.

An area where Wesleyan theology and Wesley's own ministry provide important perspectives is church growth, and I will address this briefly.<sup>17</sup>

Wesley understood that the growth of the church was connected with issues of character, discipline, and shared Christian experience. A couple of examples from Wesley's Journal for 1747 are instructive. In one place he noted that "the [Methodist] society, which the first year consisted of above 800 members, is now reduced to 400. But, according to the old proverb, the half is more than the whole."<sup>18</sup> On another occasion Wesley learned that the little society at Tetney was giving substantial contributions to the poor. The leader told Wesley, "All of us who are single persons have agreed together, to give both ourselves and all we have to God: and we do it gladly; whereby we are able from time to time, to entertain all the strangers that come to Tetney; who often have no food to eat, nor any friend to give them a lodging."<sup>19</sup> These accounts reveal something not only about discipline but also about structure. For Wesley, growth was a function of a deeper issue: The vitality and character of the Christian community.

Wesley and early Methodism demonstrate a number of dynamics which today might be called "church growth principles." Some examples: (1) effectively taking the gospel to the masses, especially the poor; (2) using and multiplying unordained itinerant preachers and other indigenous leaders; (3) providing useful structures for *koinonia* and discipleship through the network of class meetings, bands, and other groups; (4) maintaining accountability of designated leaders; and (5) adapting methods and structures to the cultural patterns of the people one is working with.

Wesley's theology and practice also says something about issues of diversity versus homogeneity and so-called "homogeneous unit" thinking. Although Wesley did not deal with the issue directly, it seems clear both from Wesley's theology and from Scripture that faithful churches must reject the notion that the church should be made up of "homogeneous units" so as to speed church growth. The four themes discussed above could be explored for insights in this area. Certainly the form of the church must not contradict the *image of God* in believers and societies. One key implication of that teaching, as well as of God's work in nature and cultures, is the vital importance of *combining*, not segregating, diversity and oneness. As B. T. Roberts noted, the New Testament stresses diversity in the body of Christ. "Man's work is uniform. In God's work there is unity in variety. You can make two buttons alike, but you cannot find two leaves exactly alike."<sup>20</sup> The church affirms diversity not as a problem but as a witness.

Wesley's stress on *preceding grace* and on the power of the Holy Spirit to *perfect Christian character* suggests an optimism of grace that should infuse our church planting and discipling. If God can transform people into the likeness of Jesus Christ, he can build communities that transcend racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural differences. Wesley's conviction that *salvation is healing* suggests potent possibilities for building reconciled and

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<sup>17</sup> See Howard A. Snyder, "A Wesleyan Perspective on Church Growth?" *Asbury Seminarian* 33 (Oct. 1978), 6-10; George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1987). See also Larry Shelton, "John Wesley and Church Growth: A Model for Today" (unpublished manuscript, 12 pp.). Shelton focuses on Wesley's theology of the nature and mission of the church, his theology of the priority and function of the laity, and his methodology of "evangelical pragmatism."

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, *Journal*, Mar. 12, 1747.

<sup>19</sup> Wesley, *Journal*, Feb. 24, 1747.

<sup>20</sup> B. T. Roberts, "Officers of the Church," *The Earnest Christian* 29:6 (June 1875), 167.

reconciling communities that are a foretaste of the “great multitude” pictured in the Book of Revelation. A hopeful sign today is the growing number of congregations that are demonstrating that diverse, multiethnic churches can grow healthily and reproduce themselves, just as in the days of the early church.<sup>21</sup>

The New Testament gospel calls the church to be a community of visible reconciliation. As René Padilla notes, the early apostles “sought to build communities in which Jew and Gentile, slave and free, poor and rich would worship together and learn the meaning of their unity in Christ right from the start, although they often had to deal with difficulties arising out of the differences in background or social status among the converts.” Clearly the apostles “never contemplated the possibility of forming homogeneous unit churches that would then express their unity in terms of interchurch relationships. Each church was meant to portray the oneness of its members regardless of their racial, cultural, or social differences.”<sup>22</sup> Based on a study of the New Testament, Padilla concludes:

The breaking down of the barriers that separate people in the world was regarded as an essential aspect of the gospel, not merely as a result of it. Evangelism therefore involved a call to be incorporated into a new humanity that included all kinds of people. Conversion was never a merely religious experience; it was also a means of becoming a member of a community in which people would find their identify in Christ rather than in race, social status, or sex. The apostles would have agreed with [Edmund] Clowney’s dictum that “the point at which human barriers are surmounted is the point at which a believer is joined to Christ and his people.”<sup>23</sup>

For this reason the “homogeneous unit” theory of church growth is unacceptable as intentional strategy, however helpful it may be in understanding the dynamics of church growth in some contexts and in reminding us to take seriously the important role of ethnicity, language, and other cultural dynamics.<sup>24</sup>

All communities by definition must have some degree of homogeneity in order to exist. The gospel in fact has its own principle of homogeneity, and it is called *reconciliation* in Christ. Within the church, the degree of both homogeneity and diversity will of course vary from place to place, depending on the cultural context, as we see in the New Testament.<sup>25</sup> But the key point of commonality, the glue that holds the church together (if it is true to the gospel), is reconciliation through Jesus Christ. Based on that reconciliation, diverse persons of diverse social situations are made one community, one body. This diversity-in-oneness is a key, unique feature of the community of the King.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, a church’s homogeneity

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<sup>21</sup> See for example Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996); Stephen A. Rhodes, *Where the Nations Meet: The Church in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> C. René Padilla, *Mission Between the Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 160, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 166f.

<sup>24</sup> Some church growth theorists, particularly Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner, have advocated the so-called “homogeneous unity principle” as a strategy in church growth. In fact there seems to be no such “principle” in Scripture, so this approach might better be called the “homogeneous unit theory.”

<sup>25</sup> Note the description of the church in Antioch in Acts 11 and 13. The church in Antioch was much more diverse than the early Jerusalem church, yet “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” and Paul and Barnabas discipled “great numbers.” In large measure because of its diversity, now including Gentiles as well as Jews, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (Acts 11:21-26).

<sup>26</sup> Diversity is as much a “mark” of the church as is unity, though of course the precise demographic and sociological contours of that diversity will vary greatly according to the cultural context. (See Howard A.

should be its diversity. The key “homogeneous principle” that unites diverse Christians is their oneness in Christ, and a key mark of a faithful church in most contexts is its diversity.

## CONCLUSION

The themes elaborated here do not, of course, exhaust Wesley’s theology and its implications for mission. In a holistic theology of mission more would need to be said about the Trinity, the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology), particularly with regard to spiritual gifts and the priesthood of believers, and the kingdom of God. In fact, however, these themes remained relatively underdeveloped in Wesley’s theology.

Still, there is a coherence and wholeness to Wesley’s essential theology. Mildred Wynkoop was right that his theology is like a rotunda with many points of entry—but all of them lead to the center, which is the love of God.

To use another image: One can imagine a different sort of Wesleyan Pentalateral, one that locates the uniqueness and promise of Wesleyan theology on the larger map of the various Christian traditions. The four outer points might be labeled Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Evangelical Protestant, and Pentecostal/Charismatic. In the center is Wesleyan theology, overlapping all the others and combining the valid accents of each in a dynamic way. And, no doubt, having something to learn from each.

This is merely a hint, not a thesis. I recognize that Wesleyan theology has its own limits, both inherently and in its various historical manifestations. Still, I believe there are essential *biblical* notes in Wesleyan theology that the church and the world desperately need to hear and experience. I have lifted up the ones that seem to me most relevant for the Free Methodist Church today.

12/14/02

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Snyder with Daniel V. Runyon, *Decoding the Church: Mapping the DNA of Christ’s Body* [Baker, 2002], chapter 1.) Minimally the diversity of the church will normally include differences of age, gender, personality, and spiritual gifts, and usually much more. The greater the range of social heterogeneity united and reconciled in the church, the greater the *visible social demonstration* of the power of the gospel that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. (Thus the Antioch church more fully demonstrated, visibly, the reconciling power of the gospel than did the early Jerusalem church.) It would be a distortion of the gospel, however, to define acceptable diversity so broadly as to include behaviors that are incompatible with Jesus’ teachings.

## ADDENDUM

### SUMMARY OF WESLEY'S THEOLOGY OF REDEMPTION

(As seen especially in his eleven sermons, Nos. 54-64, beginning with “On Eternity” and ending with “The New Creation.”)

1. God has a comprehensive plan of redemption which is being worked out on the plane of history. It might be argued that in Wesley's theology this starting point functions in the place of Calvin's doctrine of predestination.

2. This plan is rooted in the personal, loving character of God and in the correspondence between the divine nature, human nature, and the created order. Here the key thought is the image of God. In contrast to Calvin, Wesley balanced the emphasis on original sin with a strong optimism of grace.

3. The supreme goal of salvation is communion with God resulting in “holiness and happiness”; “justice, mercy, and truth.” This is expressed in and by inward and outward holiness, the mind of Christ, and walking as Christ walked. For Wesley, this *is* the Kingdom of God, both in its present manifestation and as the key reality of its final manifestation.

4. God's plan in history is possible because of the shedding abroad of his grace, especially in the work of Jesus Christ. This grace is all-encompassing, in the sense that it includes preceding (prevenient), converting, and sanctifying grace. Our redemption begins with personal conversion (regeneration, justification by faith) which is enabled by the prior attracting work of the Holy Spirit. Conversion begins the process and life of sanctification, understood as loving God with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves.

5. God's redemptive plan is being worked out progressively in the present world, primarily through the Spirit's renewing work in the Church and, to a lesser extent, in society.

6. History is moving toward the “restitution of all things,” a general consummation and restoration which will bring about not only human redemption (holiness) but the redemption, healing, and reordering of the entire created order.