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A WESLEYAN WAY TO PASTOR

WESLEYAN THEOLOGY AS PASTORAL PRACTICE

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It is widely recognized that John Wesley's theology was not written in any sort of systematic form. Indeed, books such as Randy Maddox's *Responsible Grace* are gifts to theologians and pastors who want to investigate Wesley's theology systematically.¹ What Maddox and others have done is to take Wesley's entire corpus—which consists of journals, sermons, letters, and topical treatises—and glean from them what Wesley thought about each systematic category (e.g., Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, etc.). But what we must not forget when we read these extremely helpful summations of Wesley's theology is that Wesley's writings, almost *all* of them, are at least practical, if not indeed *pastoral* works. He had a pastor's heart.

Pastoral Theology

Despite his Oxford education and his knowledge in a wide variety of topics, in what we call the liberal arts, his aims were pastoral (even before Aldersgate, indeed even at Oxford!). By pastoral, we mean a deep passion for people that acts so that they might be nourished (sometimes literally) and nurtured in the faith, no matter what point they are on along the *via salutis*. We also mean that Wesley, certainly later on in the

Methodist revival, was deeply concerned to educate and direct pastors and preachers, society and band leaders in the spiritual care of people.

Wesley as Pastor

Wesley pastored people. For example, he certainly models pastoral characteristics in his own preaching and particularly in his *letter writing*. Wesley wrote over three thousand letters. It is quite clear from Wesley's letters that he was committed to the principle that letters should be "as near approaching to familiar conversation as possible."² He often, in fact, made reference to the last personal meeting, most often pastoral in nature, he had had with his correspondent and incited her or him to use the same degree of confessional openness on the written page.³ The letters are a method of pastoring his Methodists for Wesley, since he was not fixed to one congregational context. Their content reveals his pastoral disposition.

There was a marked increase in the number of letters written by Wesley over the course of his lifetime. This can be accounted for in many ways, but the expansion of Methodism itself certainly served as the primary catalyst.⁴ Baker affirms that "the rapid growth of Methodism, combining with his own inner urge to maintain personal oversight of its multitudinous ramifications and their attendant problems, necessarily entailed a steady increase in the number of letters which he received, from scores to hundreds every year, and even to many hundreds."⁵ His need for control over the rapidly expanding movement drives his correspondence practices. He was especially in touch with his leaders and his lay preachers. In light of the number of letters he welcomed, it is astounding that Wesley seems to have abided by one of his own epistolary principles: "It is a rule with me to answer every letter I receive."⁶

Wesley received and answered over eight hundred letters to women.⁷ It can be argued that while Wesley could still exhibit his tendencies toward expediency, his letters to women display an intensity of attention plainly lacking in his more administrative correspondence

with his male preachers. They also evidence a deeper intricacy of style that enhances the differences in content.⁸ Even in his intimate correspondence with his brother Charles one still sees Wesley the leader, the administrator, the champion of his own ideas!⁹ But in the letters he penned to women, a different side of Wesley surfaces, perhaps a side that better reflects the persona known to his followers in their actual encounters with him.¹⁰ To some women Wesley wrote only one or two letters in response to some specific question. With several others, he carried on correspondence for over twenty years.¹¹

In his letters to women we see him at his best, as a pastor and spiritual guide. Overall, the letters to women offer a different picture of John Wesley than the “concise, accurate, forcible, and clear”¹² administrator of a movement. The letters reveal an intensity of personality only deepened by the contours and context of a clearly pastoral relationality. In sum, we see Wesley as a true pastor to his people.

Wesley on Pastoring

Wesley did reflect more broadly on pastoral ministry, even while acting as a personal pastor to hundreds. The most explicit text on these matters is certainly his famous “Address to Clergy” written in 1754. Its audience included his own Methodist leaders, but interestingly in this address Wesley continues to try to affect Anglican clergy, despite his growing distance from them. He begins, “Let it not be imputed to forwardness, vanity, or presumption, that one who is of little esteem in the Church takes upon him thus to address a body of people, to many of whom he owes the highest reverence. I owe a still higher regard to Him who I believe requires this at my hands.”¹³ The following is an outlined summary of this treatise.

Pastors ought to be:

1. Overseers of the church who “naturally” display:
 - a. Good understanding, clear apprehension, sound judgment, and capacity for reasoning

- b. Readiness of thought in order to answer any question
 - c. Good memory
- 2. Persons who acquire (learn) the following:
 - a. Knowledge of the office of minister
 - b. Knowledge of the Scriptures
 - c. Knowledge of the original language of Scripture
 - d. Knowledge of world history
 - e. Knowledge of the sciences
 - f. Knowledge of the early church writers
 - g. Knowledge of the social sciences
 - h. Common sense
 - i. Decorum in social spaces
- 3. Persons with spiritual dispositions based on God's grace:
 - a. Intention to save souls
 - b. Love for God and neighbor, even beyond nonclergy Christians
 - c. Desire to be an example to the flock, in abstaining from evil
 - d. Pure intentions for becoming a minister, free from greed for money or power
 - e. An understanding of the sacredness of the office of priest—spiritual mediator
 - f. Integrity in one's private life

Wesley believed that persons called to ministry must have certain natural abilities, be able to learn a wide variety of information, but most importantly, be receptive to the transforming grace of God that changes our dispositions and purifies our reasons for being pastors. Wesley had great expectations of the pastors under his leadership.¹⁴ But nothing has yet been said that makes Wesley's way of ministering particularly Wesleyan! And so we now come to the premise of this book.

A Wesleyan Paradigm

The title of this book implies something important. It implies that pastoral practices do not form themselves in a theological vacuum! Or in other words, let's ask it this way: does the way we minister have anything to do with our Wesleyan identity? We believe it does. We believe that a pastor from a Wesleyan theological perspective will understand his or her pastoral identity in particular ways; that he or she will see the very purpose of pastoring in direct correspondence with the essence of Wesley's holistic vision; and that the very practices he or she will perform will be intentional in their faithfulness to a Wesleyan identity and vision. In other words, we believe that Wesleyan theology influences the following:

- **Pastoral Personality**—God has created each person to uniquely express the *imago Dei*. This is true of pastors as well. We are not advocating in this book that we all look the same, act the same, or pastor the same. But we do believe that being a pastor in the Wesleyan tradition primarily affirms that we are called to embody the God of love. This Wesleyan vision, indeed the very experience of perfect love, is to be the deepest affection in a pastor's heart. It is to form a pastor's character, influence a pastor's deepest desire, and empower the pastor's ability to re-present Christ. In the words of Wesley, love is to become our inner *disposition*—what we might call personality today.
- **Pastoral Purpose**—God's intention for all humanity is its sanctification. Before the very foundation of the world, God called us to be a holy people. The whole purpose of the church from a Wesleyan perspective, and the pastor who serves it, is to help people reach their full, holistic potential and to mature in the stature of Christ. It is to bring persons into the love of God, and that continually, so that they might then go out as incarnational

witnesses to the world, indeed, partners in God's transformation of the world.

- **Pastoral Practices**—God has purposed that persons and communities be “shepherded” by one who is able to devote his or her life to such a high calling. Wesley cherished the priesthood, even while allowing his laity to preach. One of the primary reasons that Wesley allowed the Methodist Church in America to ordain its own pastors was because he believed America needed qualified priests to oversee the ministerial office, particularly to serve the sacraments. With the same kind of reverence, we continue to believe that while everyone in the church is called to minister in the ways he or she is gifted and enabled as members of the body, God continues to call and equip those ordained for pastoral ministry. It is thus with a unique, single-minded intentionality that a pastor pastors. More than that, we believe that Wesleyan theology is intricately knitted into the fabric of what pastors do, and that it provides unique paradigm for ministry.

Wesleyan Praxis

Let's reiterate some basics here. Wesley was first and foremost a practical theologian and he recognized the importance of the relationship of theology with the practice of ministry. Wesley resisted the division between theology and practice. According to Thomas Langford, “Wesley did not construct a theological theory which he applied to all situations; nor did he become a practitioner who undertakes application without allowing the utilization to affect its theoretical substructure. Wesley struggled to hold divergent dimensions in tight relation: emphasizing both, he allowed each to influence the other.”¹⁵ Wesley's *theology* is primarily based on a *praxis* approach, the integration of theology and practice. Wesley's *practice* is undergirded with his theology. Wesley's *praxis* approach is theology expressed through the practice of ministry such as sermons, liturgies, prayers, Bible study aids, hymns,

essays, devotional materials, and journals. Theology serves the church. Again, Wesley's theology is by nature practical, as defined by whatever agrees with right belief (orthodoxy), right practice (orthopraxis), and the genuine experience of the presence of God (orthopathy). Practical theology is always concerned with and focused on *the renewal in the image of God (Christlikeness)*, which is the soteriological focus of Wesleyan theology. Soteriology by nature is practical and not speculative.

Wesley's practical theology thus recognizes the primacy of praxis. This primacy assumes that theological reflection must always be related back to praxis through such practices as constructing sermons, liturgies, shepherding the flock, and evangelism. The following are key aspects of a uniquely Wesleyan practical theology¹⁶ and key themes at the heart of pastoral ministry.

First, practical theology should be transformative. Since humans are diseased and sinful, the goal of theology is to reform and heal humans. Wesley was primarily concerned with making Christians truly Christian; thus one criterion for assessing theology would be whether it resulted in transforming persons into Christians living Christianly in the world¹⁷ (or in perhaps more familiar words: we are to Christianize Christianity). Franz Hildebrandt agrees by stating, “The meaning of ‘practice’ for Wesley is precisely parallel to the meaning of scriptural Christianity. Practice is simply and plainly enforcement of Christianity.”¹⁸ Wesley had very little interest in theology for its own sake. Rather, theology was for the purpose of transforming personal life and social relations. This is his “practical divinity.”¹⁹ This must be the primary objective of all ministry endeavors—to see human persons reconciled to God and renewed in nature. Wesley’s focus on the transformation of human persons in the context of community provides helpful criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of contemporary ministry practices.

Second, practical theology should be holistic. Practical theology is concerned with the development of the “whole” person: the mind, the

will, and affections.²⁰ Underlying this characteristic is the conviction that what ultimately unites *orthodoxy* (mind) and *orthopraxis* (will and actions) are right affections (*orthopathos*). Wesley was very insistent that good theology understands human affections as the heart of the Christian life, as the true motivator of all we do. Too often, however, we have tried to produce right thinking, and right behavior, and have neglected the centrality of “heart religion” for Wesley and for us! There is something within us that knows that Christian love is more than what we think or even what we do. The cognitive and behavioral aspects of love are important: we know what love is through rational analysis, and we affirm that love is best expressed through volitional actions—love acts. But understanding love only from these two perspectives takes the heart out of love and, in essence, the heart out of Wesleyan theology. That is, our affections (which can be defined in Wesley as habituated emotions) influence our ability to love. Thus Wesleyan theology is never stoic; it does not seek to suppress the emotional element of life. It affirms that God uses our emotional experiences just as much as our rationality and our liberty. If love is at the center of Wesley’s theology, then we must recognize that love includes affect. And thus a Wesleyan practical theology encompasses the renewal of the *whole* person in the context of Christian community. This experiential emphasis not only adds to our theological methodology (the “Quadrilateral”) but also makes pastoral ministry in a Wesleyan paradigm unique.

Third, practical theology should be contextual. It is not as concerned with definitions of truth as determining context-sensitive embodiments of the Christian gospel.²¹ Wesley did not attempt to find a static message (i.e., propositional theology) that endures unchanged over time, remaining the same in every situation; nor did he attempt to only construct a purely contextual theology that finds its primary resources in very particular conditions of human experience.²² Wesley was sensitive to the implications of theology for Christian life and specific contexts,

and his sensitivity to particular situations helped shape his theology so as to make it practical,²³ without sacrificing his deference to the rich Christian orthodox tradition.

John Wesley's example of being a truly *practical theologian*, then, can provide pastors today with a model of integrated balance. Theology always informs what we do. But what we do is never extricated from our theology. Pastors in the tradition will reflect Wesley's theology through their ministry practices.²⁴ Many pastors have a good understanding of Wesleyan theology, but they struggle with integrating that theology with their pastoral practices.²⁵ For example, one study has shown that a sample of pastors who placed a strong emphasis on preaching the doctrine of holiness were unable to see the impact of that holiness on their own practice of ministry.²⁶ Given that holiness denominations are concerned today about a loss of theological identity, the recovery of that theological identity must certainly and ultimately find its way into the life of a congregation, perhaps most significantly in pastoral practices of our ministers. In other words, our pastoral practices should reflect our Wesleyan theology—such integration *is* our identity!

In order to examine this thesis more specifically, we have invited seasoned pastors and professionals to write chapters on how pastoral practices are informed by John Wesley's theology. We have attempted to cover a wide range of topics, although they can only be representative and certainly not all-inclusive of the various tasks of pastoral work. As you will see, the authors are all practitioners—not uninformed theoretically or theologically—but all intensely involved in the day-to-day life of ministry in their unique contexts. We have included senior pastors, associates, counselors, district and assistant superintendents, past missionaries, past college presidents, and a professor or two (with pastoral experience). Some have specializations that make them “experts” in their fields; some were simply willing to reflect more broadly on

aspects of ministry. We are grateful to all of them for their important and we believe significant and lasting contributions.

Pastor Jeff Crosno offers key insights into how we are to follow Wesley into the pulpit, as ones ordained to “Word and Sacrament.” Pastor Phil Hamner gives us the gift of a concise but deep sacramental theology that can be contextualized and applied to multiple ministry settings. Pastor Paul Willis integrates the primacy of worship into a scheme of spiritual formation—aspects of ministry too easily kept distinct. Rev. Jeren Rowell offers a model of pastoral care deeply rooted in a Wesleyan worldview. Dr. Glena Andrews and Dr. Michael Pitts offer key insights in how Wesleyan theology informs our care and counsel of others, as well as care for ourselves and our families. Dr. Ed Robinson, Dr. Stan Rodes, and Dr. Rondy Smith show that leading, discipling, and administrating the church should be deeply informed by a biblical view of servanthood and character-modeling, and suggest that such a Christlike disposition should be embraced by Wesley’s followers as imperative for effective ministry. Dr. Nell Sweeden, Dr. Dana Hicks, and Rev. Joy Wisehart show how Wesleyan theology, underscored by love, expresses itself in hospitality—to “the least of these,” to those with special needs, and to those God is wooing into relationship and the “divine dance.” Love extends itself to others. This includes specific contexts, such as multicultural settings and the inner city, as Dr. Carol Rotz, Dr. Mario Zani, and Rev. Jon Middendorf show.

We (Dr. Mark Maddix and Dr. Diane Leclerc) are blessed to work in a context where pastoral ministry is at the forefront of our ministerial education: our very purpose is to produce pastors for the present and the future of the denomination(s). Each professor in the Department of Religion is ordained and has pastored in his or her career and seeks to instill a pastor’s heart in each of our students. We are grateful for the wonderful collegiality we share with them and others in the School of Theology and Christian Ministry. Northwest Nazarene University is a great place to study ministry.

rene University is very much our home. We are particularly grateful to our students in our Senior Capstone course (2012), for trying out this book before publication and for their helpful suggestions.

We are thankful to Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City for choosing to publish this second volume in our Wesleyan Paradigm series (the first being *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*). It is our prayer that this book will be a true help to pastors in a variety of contexts, including those who are on the educational journey to such a high calling. It is our great privilege to serve in a denomination that continues to support, encourage, equip, ordain, sustain, and nurture those called by God to shepherd her sheep. And we are thankful for a theological tradition that embraces such an optimism of grace that it sees laity and ministers alike and declares “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). We all share a purpose and a vision; you, the reader, are all important as God builds the kingdom through you. May God bless your ministry, your obedience, and your sacrifice.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the primary roles of a pastoral ministry informed by Wesleyan theology?
2. Based on Wesley’s pastoral criterion of being an overseer, learner, and person of dispositions, how do these relate to your role as a pastor?
3. As you reflect on your ministry practices, what are some examples of Wesleyan theology informing your ministry practice? Are there some areas that do not reflect a Wesleyan theology?
4. Given the criterion of practical theology being transformative, holistic, and contextual, how does your ministry practice reflect this criterion?

Recommended Reading

- Heitzenrater, Richard. *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.
- Langford, Thomas A. *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984.
- Maddox, Randy L. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Maddox, Randy L., ed. *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998.