

WHY DISCIPLESHIP FROM A WESLEYAN PERSPECTIVE?

► INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are interviewing for a youth ministry position in a local congregation anchored in the Wesleyan tradition. During the interview process one of the leadership asks you to describe your theology of Christian discipleship. What would you say? Another member of the leadership asks you to provide biblical foundations to Christian discipleship. What scripture passages would you use to describe Christian discipleship?

Imagine you are teaching a series on Christian discipleship. How would you compare a Wesleyan view of discipleship with those of other faith traditions? How would you describe Christian discipleship from a Wesleyan perspective?

To be a disciple is to be a follower of Jesus Christ. A disciple is a learner, a servant (*doulos*). Christians are called to lives of discipleship that emulate the life of Christ. Discipleship, regardless of the faith tradition, includes giving up your life in order to save it (Mark 8:34-38). The great commission given by Jesus to his followers was “to go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19-20). This call is given to us as well. We are called to be Christ’s ambassadors (see 2 Corinthians 5:20), to proclaim the good news to all nations.

► CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND THE WESLEYAN CHALLENGE

All Christians hold to this biblical view of Christian discipleship; each faith tradition, however, gives specific expressions to what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Some faith traditions place a strong emphasis on a contemplative life; some emphasize social justice and mercy, while others focus on moral behavior. Each is a valid expression of Christian discipleship, but none provides a complete view.

The Wesleyan faith tradition reflects one particular expression of Christian discipleship, rooted in the theology of John Wesley and in the American Holiness Movement. The Wesleyan tradition comprises several denominations, including the Church of the Nazarene, the Free Methodist Church, the Wesleyan Church, and the Church of God (Anderson). This book strives to develop a Wesleyan approach to Christian discipleship.

While the larger Methodist tradition has always focused on discipleship, there remains a tension between ongoing education and a prominent focus on revivalism and instantaneous experiences, often promoted by itinerant evangelists and others in leadership. These challenges affect our Wesleyan heritage in general and the broader Evangelical movement in North America. This chapter begins the process by providing a rationale for a Wesleyan approach to Christian discipleship and its value to the broader church today.

LACK OF LITERATURE

Wesleyan Christian educators have struggled to articulate the role of John Wesley's theology and Christian education in several settings (Blevins 1999; Maddix 2001). Even an emphasis in Wesleyan-oriented spiritual formation texts for lay discipleship (Tracy et al. 1994) must contend with explicitly non-Wesleyan, evangelical supplemental texts in Sunday school teacher training and a "generic evangelicalism" shaped by reformed educational paradigms from conservative evangelical traditions (York 1992; Gangel 1992).

There have been some responses to the disparity. Les Steele's book *On the Way* (1990) focuses on Christian formation, David Michael Henderson's book *John Wesley's Class Meeting* (1997) provides an educational framework for Wesley's small groups, and Sondra Matthaai's book *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2000) provides a strong argument for faith formation from the Wesleyan perspective. While these books offer a significant contribution to the field, none provides a comprehensive approach to Wesleyan Christian education for the twenty-first century.

LOSS OF THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY

The lack of a comprehensive approach to Wesleyan discipleship reflects another concern, that the reformed influence within American evangelicalism threatens Wesleyan identity (Benefiel 1996; Blevins 1998, 1999; Drury 1995; Hoskins 1997).

Steve Hoskins (1997) and Keith Drury (1995) suggest that the identity crisis indicates problems in the larger Wesleyan movement. According to Drury, a primary reason for the apparent death of the movement is that we have "plunged into the evangelical mainstream" (1995, 2):

Over time we quit calling ourselves "holiness people" or "holiness churches" or "holiness colleges" or "holiness denominations." We began to introduce ourselves as "Evangelicals." We started becoming at home with NAE [National Association of Evangelicals] and CHA [Christian Holiness Association]. Local churches repositioned themselves as "evangelicals" in their communities . . . we gradually were assimilated into the evangelical mainstream. . . . The influence on our pastors [is from]

evangelical[s], not holiness leaders. Gradually the theology among our people became the same generic evangelical soup served at any other evangelical church. (Drury 1995, 2)

Until evangelicalism's collapse into fundamentalism in the twentieth century, the Wesleyan tradition was viewed within the broader Evangelical movement. *Evangelicalism* has been variously defined; according to American historian George Marsden, it refers to "a broad group of Christians who believe the same doctrines" or "a self-conscious inter-denominational movement, with leaders, publications, and institutions with which many subgroups identify" (1991, 5). The tension between interdenominational cooperation and doctrinal conflict occurs explicitly and implicitly between Wesleyan and evangelical concerns.

Has the tradition that seeks to be Wesleyan become more generally evangelical (and Reformed) to the neglect of its own distinctive theological heritage? Douglas Sweeney notes that American evangelicalism, in spite of its emphasis on revivalism, draws primarily from the Reformed church tradition and Calvinistic presuppositions, which often contradict Wesleyan theology (1991, 70-85). Wesleyan discipleship faces the challenge of differentiating between the implicit theology within the American evangelicalism subculture and a theology more consistent with the Wesleyan perspective.

For all of the theological distinctions between evangelicalism and Wesleyanism, the two traditions share a bit of history, including borrowed terminology. For instance, evangelicals claim Wesley as part of their common ancestry (Noll 2003), a particular point of departure that will be discussed later. Likewise, Wesleyans often adopt the modifier *Evangelical* to describe their actions and activities (Sanner and Harper 1978, 11). However, both traditions also assert that a "gap" (for some) or "chasm" (for others) remains between them.

Evangelicals (Noll 2004, 38) tend to be suspicious, if not actually dismissive, of the intellectual content within Wesleyan movements. Evangelicals also tend to misrepresent, if not completely misunderstand, the holiness doctrine of the Wesleyan tradition, often due to a lack of familiarity with current research (Geisler 2004, 238-40, 578-87). Wesleyans remain decidedly suspicious of Calvinist soteriology, be it substitutionary atonement or unconditional election (Dunning 1988, 378-79). Wesleyans note with alarm that appropriation of seemingly generic evangelical curriculum carries with it real soteriological risks (York 1992).

Other Wesleyan denominations also wrestle with the desire to be true to their Wesleyan roots. For example, David McKenna of the Free Methodist Church provides a link between the message of John Wesley and its relevance in our fast-paced, fluid, postmodern culture (1999). Theodore Runyon,

a United Methodist, provides a sound description of John Wesley's theology as formulated in the eighteenth century and how it applies today to such issues as human rights, the problems of poverty and economic rights, and the rights of women (1998, 168). These world issues were concerns during Wesley's time that have new significance for today.

A strong Wesleyan voice within evangelicalism may prove beneficial for both traditions; each claims the brothers Wesley as part of its common ancestry (even if disputes began as early as Wesley's encounters with Puritan evangelicals). For instance, both Mark Noll (2000, 1-11) and Dallas Willard (2000, 30) claimed Wesley as each tradition's great-grandfather when an evangelical professorship was established at Yale University. George Marsden acknowledges the inclusion of Methodist, Pentecostal, and other movements as aids in diversifying the inauguration of the National Association of Evangelicals (1991, 28-31). The place of theologically sound Wesleyans within the Evangelical movement may ensure that a broader conversation continues within evangelical settings.

Wesleyans may also find new points of conversation and collaboration as evangelicalism changes in the face of new, postmodern adaptations. Henry Knight offers key comparisons between the emerging postmodern Christian consciousness and Wesleyan theology: "Wesleyans should support this new movement because the purposes and values that emerging churches seek to embody—their vision of discipleship, church, and mission—are highly congruent with those of the Wesleyan tradition" (Knight 2007, 34). Collaborations with new church leadership may open doors between Wesleyans and evangelicals that respect the contributions of both traditions.

These examples signify the emergence of a newly robust Wesleyan theology for the church. Therefore, a fresh attempt to recover a Wesleyan approach to Christian discipleship, based on John Wesley's theology, is a necessary and valuable contribution to this conversation.

► WESLEYAN THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Another rationale for a Wesleyan approach to Christian discipleship is the disconnection that often occurs between Wesleyan theology and Christian education. Theology should inform Christian education. What we believe about God, sin, and salvation should influence our educational practices. Randolph Crump Miller states, "The major task of Christian education today is theology, and in theology properly interpreted lies the answer to most of the pressing educational problems of the day" (1950, 4). Rediscovery of a relevant theology will bridge the gap between content and method, providing the background and perspective of Christian truth (15).

Historically, Christian education has been concerned with the knowledge of God (viewed through the lens of the tradition), the role of the church, the nature of human beings, the mission of the church in the world, and the method of theology (Seymour and Miller 1982, 10). By the end of the twentieth century, however, Christian education had been reduced to technique and skill development. Christian educators became more pragmatic, influenced by fads in Christian education, which resulted in a disconnection between their faith tradition and theology and their ministry practices. Pastors in the tradition may have a good understanding of Wesleyan theology, but they do not apply it in educational settings (Maddix 2001, 220). When pastors described how their theology influenced their educational practices, they used the language of Wesley's theology but did not connect it with their educational practices (*ibid.*). Pastors and Christian educators placed a strong emphasis on teaching and preaching a holiness message but were unable to see the impact of holiness on their practice of ministry. For a tradition to reflect John Wesley's theology, it must be seen in its ministry practice (25). Theology and practice inform each other; one cannot be divorced from the other. Mary Elizabeth Moore laments, "Theology remains little affected by educational practices," and educational practices are little affected by theological reflection. Moore calls for "theology and education to stand in relationship, to speak to one another, and to be reformed by one another" (1991, 1). Integration of theology and practice is central to a Wesleyan approach to Christian education.

► TOWARD A WESLEYAN APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

A Wesleyan approach to Christian education will seek to recover Wesleyan theology and propose practices that are shaped by that theology. It will include a renewed focus on Wesley's view of sacramental theology, specifically the "means of grace"; Wesley's focus on Christian conferencing in small groups as an avenue for "growth in grace"; and a renewed interest in Wesley's view of holiness as a process of "growth in grace" (Maddix 2001, 225). These will be covered in detail in later chapters, but a brief overview is helpful here.

"MEANS OF GRACE"

John Wesley's theology and educational perspective were most clearly reflected in his view of the "means of grace" (Blevins 1999, 21-30). God ordains these outward signs, words, and actions as channels that convey his grace. The means of grace include practices that Christians associate with spiritual formation: the Eucharist, Bible reading and proclamation, prayer and fasting, worship, service and social ministry, church and small-group participation.

As described by Wesley, God conveys grace toward humanity through these educational and ministry practices, thus leading to spiritual maturity and holiness of heart and life. “For Wesley, the means of grace provide an inner logic that asserts that the means to Christian life (salvation) and the ends of the Christian life (holy living) are intertwined within the practices of the means of grace” (Knight 1992, 168-96).

The means of grace provide an orienting framework for Christian education. Undergirded by Wesley’s sacramental theology and his desire for a transformative holiness of heart and life, the complementary approaches we have already identified as *formation*, *discernment*, and *transformation* constitute an authentic Wesleyan Christian education. Wesley’s organization of the instituted and prudential means of grace, along with acts of mercy, corresponds with educational theories of formation, discernment, and transformation (see chapter 5).

SMALL GROUP FORMATION

A second aspect of a Wesleyan approach to Christian education includes the recovery of Wesley’s small group formation. Wesley’s development of interlocking groups of societies, classes, and bands provides the overall framework for accountability, relationships, and spiritual formation for Methodism (Henderson 1997, 83-126). Wesley’s system of group formation is distinct and was the primary basis for the success of Methodism. His development of groups as a means for holy living is unparalleled in eighteenth-century England. It reflects his soteriological focus on “holiness of heart and life.” D. Michael Henderson’s groups, which emphasize cognitive (societies), behavioral (classes), and affective (bands) aspects of human development, fit naturally into Wesley’s model. Henderson’s system of group formation could be adapted for congregational use as a means of spiritual growth and discipleship (1997), reclaiming Wesley’s distinctive approach to spiritual formation and discipleship.

“HOLINESS OF HEART AND LIFE”

The goal of Wesleyan educational ministry is “holiness of heart and life.” Wesley’s soteriological focus was most clearly reflected in his desire for holiness and sanctification of all humanity. Holiness of heart and life is the driving force behind all of Wesley’s educational practices. It is the *telos* of all ministry and educational practices.

Christian educators and pastors differ in their views of *holiness*. Some believe that holiness of heart and life is a process of development, while others see holiness as an instantaneous event. A Wesleyan approach to Christian education includes the understanding of holiness as a process of growth through

participation in the means of grace and a life of obedience to God, which is central to Christian discipleship.

► CONCLUSION

The need for a Wesleyan approach to Christian discipleship is evidenced by the lack of literature in the field of Christian education, the concern about a loss of theological identity within the Wesleyan tradition, and the significant role theology plays in informing Christian discipleship. Christian educators within the Wesleyan tradition have a renewed interest in John Wesley's theology and its relationship to Christian discipleship. This book develops a fresh approach to Christian discipleship from a Wesleyan perspective by focusing on the means of grace as an orienting framework for Christian education that incorporates Wesley's model of interlocking learning and formation groups, with the primary goal of holiness of heart and life.

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