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INTRODUCTION
WESLEYAN ECCLESIOLOGY

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At a recent meeting of pastors and professors, it quickly became apparent that a shared concern of the gathered group was the lack of an adequate ecclesiology in the Church of the Nazarene. This concern is not a new one. An Article of Faith on the church was added to our doctrinal statements relatively recently in our history that sought to address this vacuum. While the addition was a step in the right direction, because of its brevity and its more functional tone (vs. theological), it should certainly not be considered a "final word." The purpose of the recent meeting in Colorado was to continue a conversation that had started years ago regarding clergy preparation in the denomination, but that had been discontinued after some goals were accomplished. In the first of a series of meetings to renew the conversation, it seemed like this pronounced lack of ecclesiology blocked some of the work because ecclesiology is an obvious prerequisite for understanding the purpose, function, and educational preparation of clergy.

Having experienced the meeting firsthand, we wondered if a book on the subject could take us a step closer in our process of developing an ecclesiology denominationally. In the same spirit and structure of the two previous books we coedited—*Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm* and *Pastoral Practices: A Wesleyan Paradigm*—we proposed a third in the series, *Essential Church: A Wesleyan Paradigm*. As in the other books, a major theme here is the articulation of why and how particularly Wesleyan theology adds to a theology of the church. The book will contain three major sections. The first seeks

to answer the question of exactly what the church is—its nature and purpose, particularly in relation to the triune God. The second section focuses more on what the church does—its primary functions internally and externally (in the church and outside in the world). The third section seeks to address how the church is organized—the theology behind the church's structure, regarding clergy, superintendency, and laity.

It is important to us that the audience sees this book not as some definitive word, nor as a singular voice that will put an end to the discussion, but that it is simply trying to take the conversation forward. In light of this, we include writers from many of our colleges/seminaries. We have also purposely included persons from different disciplines, including biblical scholars, systematic theologians, practical theologians, historians, philosophers, and pastors. At this point, we see this book as a "theology book" used in educational settings, but it is also addressed to anyone, pastor or laity, who wants to understand better the function, meaning, and purpose of the church.

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"A more ambiguous word than this, the *Church,* is scarce to be found in the English language,"[1] said John Wesley. We agree with him. Although every doctrine has its complexities, ecclesiology seems more nebulous in ways. Perhaps this is because there is no one orthodox claim, as there is with, say, Christology. Or, perhaps this is because the church has split so many times that the actual number of denominations and ecclesial options is staggering.[2] This leads to the question of *which* church? Which church demonstrates the correct meaning, purpose, functions, and politic of the true church? Certainly those of us who follow a Wesleyan paradigm have a guideline to follow when constructing our theological, practical, and functional ecclesiologies? Yes, and no. There *is* a determinable Wesleyan "ethos" that can act as a compass. On the other hand, specific elements of Wesley's thought can be used to support various ecclesiologies. While Wesley himself says "church" is an ambiguous term, we can say further that his own ecclesiology is also somewhat ambiguous. At least in the way it is utilized. According to Gwang Seok Oh:

> Many interpretative works have attempted to rediscover Wesley's ecclesiology and apply his principles and forms to modern expressions of the church. However, the multifaceted Wesley and the complexity of the situation surrounding the origins of Methodism provide warrant for

> any number of divergent perspectives on the church. Those who see the life of the church in spiritual dynamic of small groups may point to the class meeting and the loose organization of Wesley's Methodist societies for their model of the church. Those who have more institutional and ecumenical concerns may stress Wesley's life-long allegiance to the Church of England and view him as the champion of conciliation and reform *within* the ecclesiastical structures. Some may point to Wesley's conservative policies regarding the administration of the sacraments and use of liturgical forms in their criticism of the free style of worship in many contemporary churches. Others may stress Wesley's willingness to discard the practices of the established church for the flexibility of field preaching and extemporaneous prayers . . . It would appear that the eclectic nature of Wesley's thought and actions creates the same problem for ecclesiology that also annoys those who endeavor to find some hermeneutical key for his systematic theology.[3]

So what, then, can be said of Wesley's ecclesiology? Are there any facets that are characteristic of his theology as a whole? We would propose three major themes that can be considered characteristic of a Wesleyan paradigm in regard to the church. This is not to say that these three elements aren't found in other theological traditions. But we are affirming that these aspects of the church rise to the surface of Wesley's thought and characterize the scheme of theology that takes his name. They are found in Wesley's sermon "Of the Church."

First, the church is where God is appropriately worshipped, the Word is rightly preached, and the sacraments are properly practiced. Wesley says this specifically in his sermon on the church. "The definition of a Church [is the place] in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered."[4] There is no doubt that Wesley highly esteemed rather high forms of worship. He even claimed that "according to this definition, those congregations in which the pure Word of God (a strong expression) is not preached are no parts either of the Church of England, or the Church catholic; as neither are those in which the sacraments are not duly administered."[5] This is Wesley's ideal, following the Church of England article statement.

He goes on to say that there may be legitimate congregations who do not practice the sacraments. But he attributes this to wrong theology and never implies that the sacraments are optional. In the same way, "I dare not

exclude from the Church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed to be 'the pure word of God,' are sometimes, yea, frequently preached."[6] What he does to manage this is to point to an even higher standard of a true church: "Whoever they are that have 'one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all,' I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions."[7] In other words, this early form of a confession or creed binds persons to the church catholic, even when the ideal is not met.

The real question is whether God is receiving the church's full worship. It is implied that being of "one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one God" is to ascribe to God that God is indeed worthy of praise. One of the worst sins for Wesley is the sin of idolatry. To put anything in the place of God affects not only our ability to worship but also our ability to be fully human.[8] A Wesleyan ecclesiology must include worship, preaching, the sacraments, and creedal confession if it is to reach the ideal. The Holy Spirit takes these practices and binds congregants together in perfect unity.

Second, the church is a gathering where its people are intentionally present to each other. The church is a healing community, a place of deep acceptance, a place of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love.[9] It is a community of the Spirit that shows the fruit of the Spirit, even as the Spirit enables each to display their gifts to the body. Each part is equally valuable. The parts are interdependent on the others. And the parts display empathy as an expression of mutual love. According to Wesley, the church is called together to "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called."[10] This walking together is "with all lowliness" as we are clothed with humility, and as we experience God's cleansing and God's empowerment.[11] It is also a walk of "longsuffering" and "forbearing one another in love." This

> seems to mean, not only the not resenting anything, and the not avenging yourselves; not only the not injuring, hurting, or grieving each other, either by word or deed; but also the bearing one another's burdens; yea, and lessening them by every means in our power. It implies the sympathizing with them in their sorrows, afflictions, and infirmities; the bearing them up when, without our help, they would be liable to sink under their burdens; the endeavoring to lift their sinking heads, and to strengthen their feeble knees . . . the true members of the Church of

> Christ "endeavour" with all possible diligence . . . to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."[12]

Wesley, of course, had means and mechanisms for how this type of mutual life is to be lived. His classes and bands still serve today as models for life together. There persons not only held each other up but also challenged each other and held each other accountable. Put most simply, they were confessional communities. And where there is confession there is healing.[13] This is a place where we would do well to revitalize mutual confession for our shared benefit. Worship is a key element of the church. Shared life is a key element of the church. But the church was never intended to keep to itself, even as its internal functions are indeed good. The people of the church are to go out to the world. There is a rhythm to the Christian life—we are gathered in in order to be breathed out.

Third, the church is missionally engaged with the world, offering hospitality, justice, liberation, and the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Life together provides what we need, individually and corporately, to live in the world as beacons of Light. We are strengthened by each other through the Spirit, in order that we may encounter the world as Christ's representatives. And what do we represent? God's love, salvation through Christ, life in the Spirit. But we are also to be agents of change, to welcome the stranger, bring justice to the helpless, to offer liberation for the oppressed, and live as citizens of God's kingdom.

In the following chapters, the reader will find various expressions of the church's call to worship, live life together, and change the world.

Part 1: The Church at Its Core

The first section of the book seeks to answer the question of the nature and purpose of the church, particularly in relationship to the triune God. Dr. Eric Severson's chapter proposes that the kingdom of God is an *event*, rather than an institution. He argues that the goal of ecclesiology should be to attend to the kind of events that bear the markings of this elusive kingdom. The event of church is something that happens beyond, outside of, and sometimes even *despite* our organizational efforts. So the doctrine of the church is not so much about a special set of ideas as about positioning our lives together in such a way that we might participate in *something* of God *happening*. Severson

claims that the event of the church is the scandalously particular appearance of the life of Jesus Christ in the face-to-face relations between human lives. Church happens not when some script is followed to the last detail, but when the story of the cruciform love of Jesus of Nazareth is carried on in the midst of a community.

Henry Spaulding II and III, a father and son duo, provide a Trinitarian ecclesiology rooted in the history of the church. They illustrate that the church is an expression of the triune life of the Godhead. This is both an affirmation and an invitation for all of humanity to join in the harmonic unity of the triune life. The church exists at the intersection of the divine and human order. Thus, the church arises from God toward humanity as the triune identity receives the echo of praise from those who have been redeemed. The church is formed by God alone and as such is identified in time through the triune life of God. It also does not separate mission from its agenda, for mission is what God calls the church to be in the world.

Mark Mann's chapter builds on this Trinitarian ecclesiology by focusing on the central role that Christology plays in the church. He is quick to affirm Trinitarian theology that is not Christocentric, but that the doctrine of the Trinity by definition requires that Christology be at the center of our understanding of who God is and what God is doing, and therefore is foundational for all dimensions of theological reflection. He also shows that Christology is tied closely with the work of the Holy Spirit since the Holy Spirit is God's enlivening presence in the world, giving life, purpose, and mission to the church.

Building on Mark Mann's chapter on Christology and the work of the Holy Spirit, Diane Leclerc's chapter on the pneumatology, the work of the Holy Spirit, provides a theological foundation for how the church is initiated, sustained, and a conduit of God's mission in the world, *missio Dei.* The church is dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit, and without it, God would not be about to bring about divine and eternal purposes. God has called the church to act with the Spirit synergistically to convey God's purposes. She develops a Wesleyan phenomenology by showing that the Spirit is active to awaken persons of their sin, to provide forgiveness and healing and sanctification to believers.

Tim Crutcher shows how the church was formed and depicted by Luke in the Luke-Acts narrative. These early followers of Jesus began to figure out

who they were, and during the next few centuries various Christian writers and thinkers reflected on the nature of the church. Through their struggles, both internally and externally, a consistent theme emerged and crystalized into four attributes of the church in the Nicene Creed, "We believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church." Crutcher expounds the significance of each aspect of the creed and reminds us that when we recite the creed we affirm the work of the Holy Spirit that historically links us back to Jesus' original followers as we continue the mission of those followers in the world.

The last chapter in the core essentials section is written by Deirdre Brower Latz. Deirdre develops a Wesleyan understanding of the relationship of the church to culture and provides emphasis on postmodern marks of the church. A Wesleyan stance toward culture is not rejecting it, nor assimilation within it, but is profoundly hopeful toward it as a type of via media. With Wesleyan theology as the starting point, she claims that the cultural correlation that Wesleyans undertake is one of engaging with culture. She asserts that the church in the Wesleyan tradition must engage with postmodern elements, which will result in enrichment and revitalization as able participants and agents of change for the sake of Christ in the twenty-first century.

Part 2: The Church's Essential Functions

The second section of the book focuses on the primary internal (in the church) and external (outside in the world) functions of the church. Jeffrey Barker begins the discussion by focusing on worship as a primary function of the church that shapes our understanding of ecclesiology. He asserts that in worship God's people gather to remember the cosmic scope of God's salvation and their personal reception of this gracious gift. Each week in worship, the ecclesia participates anew and bears witness again to God's cosmic-shaped salvation. Christian worship proclaims God's salvation through the person and work of Jesus the Christ witnessed to by the Spirit. Barker articulates a Wesleyan approach to worship that honors God, transforms the worshipper, and compels him or her to acts of love and service in the world. For Wesleyans, the telos of worship is God's honor and the church's edification.

A central aspect of a Wesleyan approach to worship includes the sacraments. Brent Peterson's chapter illustrates the close interaction of John and Charles Wesley between the church (ecclesiology) and the soteriological

healing found in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Peterson develops more fully the role of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as the primary occasions where God grows (baptism) and sustains (the Lord's Supper) the church, even as its healing and sanctification precipitates the further redemption of the world. Peterson views the sacraments as a "means of grace" whereby God offers healing to persons as persons respond to God's invitation of healing.

A Wesleyan view of ecclesiology includes the people of God gathered around Word and Table. Coupled with Peterson's focus on the Eucharist, James Fitzgerald's chapter includes the proclamation of Scripture. Fitzgerald's chapter illustrates the importance of preaching and the kerygmatic function the church plays in proclaiming the good news of the gospel to all the world. He articulates that while Wesley emphasized the role of preaching, both for clergy and field preaching, he was not willing to separate that from the broader scope of the life and work of the church. He always held to the importance of *both* properties of the church—the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.

Mark Maddix's chapter provides a holistic Wesleyan approach to Christian education through catechesis. Central to this catechetical process is Wesley's view of the "means of grace." By viewing Wesley's categories of the instituted and prudential means of grace, along with the acts of mercy, a suggestive way of ordering educational practices into three complementary approaches to Christian education includes *formation, discernment,* and *transformation.* Maddix develops each of these educational practices as avenues that help persons grow in holiness of heart and life.

The success of Methodism can be attributed to the development of formative communities that nurtured growth and development among believers. Dean Blevins develops Wesley's approach to community through his small group system. These groups provided a habitus for deeper, spiritual healing and empowerment. Blevins articulates that for Wesley, Christian community provided the context and the means for spiritual formation through an accountable discipleship anchored in shared story, shared practices, and relational bonds. Wesleyan formation occurs primarily through community, whether in the worshipping community or through smaller fellowships of disciplined discipleship; fellowships where people covenant together in a common Christian story to practice differing means of grace and lovingly

hold one another accountable through transparent but disciplined relationships.

Kristina LaCelle-Peterson's chapter on the church as liberator provides a Wesleyan approach to egalitarian liberation of all social classes, with particular focus on the liberation of women. Since all persons are deemed equally worthy recipients of God's grace, from God, then it follows that all are welcomed to participate in the redeemed community. Radical egalitarianism was a feature of the ministry of John and Charles Wesley's small groups and revivalism during the eighteenth century and was predominant in early American Methodism. A Wesleyan ecclesiology today includes an egalitarian view of leadership, including all social classes of society.

Stephen Riley's chapter on the church includes acts of compassion and justice that illustrate the central mission of the church as the proclamation of the good news and redeeming of all creation. When the church is faithful to its central mission, lives are transformed and right relationship with God is restored. Riley, an Old Testament professor, argues that the concept of *shalom* encompasses the good news of wholeness, justice, compassion, and righteousness. He shows that within Israel's life with God, the clearest example of what it means to live in *shalom* is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This takes place through acts of justice and compassion.

The final chapter in section two is the church as a witnessing community. David Busic develops this idea from Acts 2 and the coming of the Holy Spirit. He says that the church was born to bear the good news of Jesus, to be witnesses, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be God's witnesses in the world. He also gives focus to the role of the *heralder*, who is called to proclaim the good news through preaching.

Part 3: The Church as Organized Organism

The third section addresses the theology of how the church is organized, which includes the church's structure, clergy, superintendency, and laity. Richard Thompson provides a Wesleyan approach to the church by giving focus to the biblical metaphor of the body of Christ. He develops the metaphor of the body of Christ from Paul's letter to the church of Corinth that includes God's sanctifying work in setting apart the church as God's holy people and the role of Christians in loving one another, which results in

the church functioning to live out that divine work as the holy people of God. Since the heart of Wesleyan theology is love, then Christians are to express that love in loving relationships. As divine grace shapes us, it enables the church as God's people to be a missional people.

One of the overarching tensions in developing an ecclesiology is the relationship between the ordained clergy and the laity. Rebecca Laird engages in this discussion by giving focus to theology of the laity built on the Reformation theme of the priesthood of believers. She shows that this false dichotomy of clergy and laity is not consistent with the scriptural witness of the *laos* (laity), referring to all who seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ. She shows how John Wesley empowered laity to serve in ministry through witnessing, caring for the poor, and leading small groups. It was Wesley's leadership that opened the door for others to engage in preaching, teaching, and administration that reviled the Oxford-qualified ordained.

Continuing this conversation about clergy and laity, Brent Peterson provides a Wesleyan approach to ecclesiology that includes a robust theology of ordination. Peterson explores the relationship of the clergy to the church and to the laity, as well as the clergy's responsibility to preach, administer the sacraments, and order the church. He also offers insights into what pastors are *not* called to do. Pastor Jeff Crosno's chapter moves beyond the traditional role of the clergy, such as preaching and the sacraments, and raises concerns about having an adequate ecclesiology that is adaptive rather than functional to sustain a pastor's life. He develops the metaphor of the "designated reader" from the Old Testament idea of what a king should be like. Crosno argues that the king is someone who embodies absolute dependence upon God by refusing to be self-deceived by human power. Serving as the "designated reader," the king becomes a public and visible reminder of the trust and piety to which his subjects are called. Crosno asserts that the church could use this image to affirm priorities that value the formation of holy character above mere competency in pastoral technique or methods.

The final chapter, written by Jeren Rowell, gives a functional theology of the role of the superintendent—the pastor of pastors. He develops the role of overseer or superintendent from New Testament texts, with focus on the Greek word *episkopes,* often translated "bishop." These texts suggest that the *episkopes* is *going*, *visiting*, and *seeing* and can be viewed not only in terms of the practices of oversight and accountability but especially in terms of an

oversight that is informed by God's initiating movement toward us in love. Rowell shows that as God moves toward us in love, so those called to and charged with oversight in God's church should move toward the people of God in love rather than employing models of leadership that become hierarchical and deferential. He concludes the chapter by giving some practical examples for those who serve as superintendents.

Conclusion

As you read these chapters we invite you to enter into the continual conversation about Wesleyan ecclesiology and how it can be lived out and practiced in our local congregations today. We realize this book doesn't always provide definite answers but does raise important questions for those in the Wesleyan tradition as we grapple with an adequate ecclesiology that empowers and shapes us to love God more fully and to live out God's redemptive mission in the world. May God be glorified through the church!