

Holistic Mission and the Wesleyan Pentilateral

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How may we speak comprehensively about faithful Christian mission today? How can “the good news of the kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43, 8:1, 16:16) be announced and lived out in ways that are biblically faithful, pointedly relevant, and demonstrably powerful in a world of globalization, postmodernism, virtual reality, disease and grinding poverty, ethnic and religious conflicts, growing ecological crisis, and moral and spiritual confusion?

Over the last thirty years, the quest for appropriate language for Christian mission has given rise to a series of phrases and theological approaches: *Holistic mission, integral mission, incarnational mission, transformational mission* (or mission as transformation), and similar terms. Each term has its history and its strengths and limitations. Perhaps the most significant development theologically has been the growing consensus around “the mission of God,” *missio Dei*, understood in Trinitarian terms and in relation to a comprehensive biblical theology of the kingdom of God.

Comprehensive approaches to mission often falter both for lack of adequate language and because of theological blind spots. Evangelicals famously have struggled to hold together “evangelism and social action” (as the issue is often misleadingly and unhelpfully put). Wesleyans have pointed to the usefulness of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience in dealing comprehensively with the church’s mission (and with theology generally).¹ I agree with many Wesleyans (and with Clark Pinnock, for that matter²)

¹ I do not enter here into the debates about the history or legitimacy of the so-called Quadrilateral, but see below.

² See Barry L. Callen, *Clark H. Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 2000), 181.

that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is theologically useful on the road to a comprehensive biblically-faithful theology for today, despite its limitations.

But the Wesleyan Quadrilateral has a serious limitation, especially from a missional standpoint. The problem is that it masks the key role of *creation* in Wesley's theology. Yet this creation emphasis is precisely what is needed today (in tandem with the other elements of the Quadrilateral) in order to articulate a comprehensive and convincing theology of Christian mission (in other words, a missiology).

The Moral Poison of Dualism

A perennial problem in Christian theology has been an unbiblical split between spirit and matter. Western theology has been plagued by a spirit/matter dualism inherited primarily from Platonism and Neo-Platonism.³ This dualistic worldview was reinforced by Enlightenment thought, which bequeathed us a faith/reason, or faith/science, dichotomy. The problem of an unbiblical spirit/matter dualism is as much a problem in Eastern as it is in Western theology, however.

Christian theology has never really successfully grounded doctrine in the kind of biblical holism that puts a proper valuation on the material world while maintaining the primacy of spiritual reality. When philosophy or Christian theology has attempted to strike a biblical balance, it generally has gone to the opposite extreme, ending up in materialism or monism.

John Wesley's theology was much more holistic, comprehensive, and conjunctive than that of the dominant theologies of his day. In fact, Wesley's own theology was more dynamically holistic than are Wesleyan, Pentecostal, or Evangelical theologies today. Viewed in the long tradition of Christian doctrine, Wesley's theology to a significant degree

³ I am speaking here of our assessment and understanding of the material creation, not of the philosophical question of the relationship between God and matter. The biblical worldview is neither dualism nor monism.

overcame in fact, and certainly overcomes in tendency, the dualism of both the Eastern and Western traditions.

An unbiblical spirit/matter dichotomy is deeply embedded in contemporary Evangelical and Pentecostal theology, piety, and hymnody. Our hymns and songs speak of “raptured souls,” of being “weaned from earth,” of inhabiting a bodiless, totally immaterial, spiritual eternity. Life on earth is but a “dark maze” and a “transient dream”; the goal is to be borne “safe above, a ransomed soul.”⁴

Thus we sing, and thus we apparently believe. Yet at some level we must know this is unbiblical. Only grudgingly or incidentally, it seems, do we confess the resurrection of the body. Only theoretically do many Christians believe that Jesus was fully human. Popular Christian piety sees Jesus as the escape route from our materiality into pure nonmaterial spirituality, which (many seem to think) is where everyone *really should* dwell, not only in eternity but right now, as Christians on earth.

This is insidious, not least because it in effect secularizes and “atheizes” the material world of politics, economics, and international affairs, leaving them free to operate on the basis of “political realism” or the “invisible hand” of the marketplace. Thus individualistic consumerism, materialism, and abuse of the earth escape any functional Christian ethical critique. If this is not heresy, it is the next thing to it. Most American Evangelical Christians, it seems, simply do not know how to deal with or properly value the material world without giving it either too little or too much attention.

The Wesleyan Pentalateral

⁴ Though many other examples might be cited, I refer here to the hymns “Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross,” by Fanny Crosby; “Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart,” by George Croly; and “My Faith Looks Up to Thee,” by Ray Palmer. Fortunately we also have some hymns and songs that give a contrasting view, such as “This Is My Father’s World” and “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life.”

The solution to such spirit/matter dualism is a biblical holism, beginning with a biblical doctrine of creation. Here Wesley's insights and theological methodology are critically helpful. In my view, in his view of creation and the "natural" world, Wesley was more profound than he himself perhaps realized.

Here is where the limitations of the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture become evident. True, Wesley used reason, tradition, and experience as sources of authority in theology. But he also looked to "the wisdom of God in creation." Without this element the Quadrilateral is seriously flawed and tends simply to perpetuate the unbiblical spirit/matter dualism.

In other words, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (which of course is a post-Wesleyan construct) is part of the problem. It subtly reinforces a spirit/matter dualism by neglecting the very material, spacetime reality of the created universe. We need to be more authentically Wesleyan than the Quadrilateral suggests. And here Wesley himself points the way.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral does preserve some essential insights. It reminds us that Wesley, as heir of the Protestant Reformation but also of an Anglican tradition that wanted to preserve the best of Roman Catholicism, generally refused rigid either/or categories. The Reformation watchword of *Sola scriptura* is right in affirming Scripture as the essential, authoritative revealed basis of salvation. But of course in practice we do more than read Scripture in our search for truth. We read it through our rational, experiential, and cultural lenses. We are in fact shaped by tradition and experience, and we use reason to sort out truth and mediate competing claims.

The so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral is thus an important insight. We use all four elements, and they are all in varying ways valid sources of truth.⁵

⁵ Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

But Wesley made use of another key source—the created order. So we really have in Wesley (if we wish to use this kind of model) a *pentalateral*, not a quadrilateral. We discern truth through Scripture (primary source), but also through these other great gifts of God: Reason, creation, experience, and tradition. And it will not do to “fix” the quadrilateral by subsuming creation under one of the other elements—reason or experience, for instance. While creation may in some sense be implicit in all four elements, it must be made explicit in order to avoid misunderstanding Wesley’s theology and missing its importance for missiology.

Wesley was explicit about the key role of the created universe. He wrote in “God’s Approbation of His Works,” “How small a part of this great work of God [in creation] is man able to understand! But it is our duty to contemplate what he has wrought, and to understand as much of it as we are able.”⁶ For Wesley, such “contemplation” is a theological, not just a devotional, exercise.

Similarly, in preaching from the Sermon on the Mount Wesley affirmed,

God is in all things, and . . . we are to see the Creator in the glass of ever creature; . . . we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical atheism; but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe.⁷

Wesley’s reliance on the created order as a source of insight and authority runs through all his thought. A particularly pointed statement comes early in his *Compendium of Natural Philosophy, Being a Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*:

⁶ Wesley, Sermon 56, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” 2.

⁷ Wesley, Sermon 23, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse III,” I.11.

In short, the world around us is the mighty volume wherein God hath declared himself. Human languages and characters are different in difference nations. And those of one nation are not understood by the rest. But the book of nature is written in a universal character, which every man may read in his own language. It consists not of words, but things, which picture out the Divine perfections. The firmament every where expanded, with all its starry host, declares the immensity and magnificence, the power and wisdom of its Creator. Thunder, lightning, storms, earthquakes and volcanoes, shew the terror of his wrath. Seasonable rains, sunshine and harvest, denote his bounty and goodness, and demonstrate how he opens his hand, and fills all living things with plenteousness. The constantly succeeding generations of plants and animals, imply the eternity of their first cause. Life subsisting in millions of different forms, shows the vast diffusion of this animating power, and death the infinite disproportion between him and every living thing.

Even the actions of animals are an eloquent and a pathetic [i.e., emotionally moving] language. Those [animals] that want [i.e., need] the help of man have a thousand engaging ways, which, like the voice of God speaking to his heart, command him to preserve and cherish them. In the mean time the motions or looks of those which might do him harm, strike him with terror, and warn him, either to fly from or arm himself against them. Thus it is, that every part of nature directs us to nature's God.⁸

⁸ John Wesley, *A Compendium of Natural Philosophy, Being a Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, "A New Edition," ed. Robert Mudie, 3 vols. (London, UK: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1836), 2:370f. Cf. Burtner and Chiles, *John Wesley's Theology*, 36. Wesley says in his Preface, "I wished to see this short, full, plain account of the visible creation, directed to its right end; not barely to entertain an idle barren curiosity, but to display the invisible things of God; his power, wisdom and goodness." Wesley hoped this work, "in great measure, translated from the Latin work of John Francis Buddæus," might "be the means, on the one hand, of humbling the pride of man, by showing that he is surrounded on every side with things which he can no more account for than for immensity or eternity; and it may serve on the other to display the amazing power, wisdom, and goodness of the great Creator; to warm our hearts, and to fill our mouths with wonder, love, and praise!" 1:iii-vi.

Wesley's primary accent here is that the created order shows us God's wisdom, glory, and beauty, leading us to praise him and live responsibly before him in the world.⁹ But this implies, as well, *revelation*—creation is the God-given “book of nature.” It is in the light of this book of nature that we interpret the Scriptures, and vice versa.

Creation and Christian Mission

If we discern Wesley's theological methodology inductively from his own writings and use of sources, we are in fact drawn to something like a Wesleyan Pentalateral with creation as a key component, rather than just a quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. This has been cogently argued by some Latin American Methodist theologians and is well articulated by Luís Wesley de Souza in his essay, “‘The Wisdom of God in Creation’: Mission and the Wesleyan Pentalateral.”¹⁰ De Souza recognizes however the limitations of such quadrilateral/pentalateral language. Although he uses the term “Pentalateral,” the model he proposes actually puts Scripture at the center with reason, creation, experience, and tradition arrayed around it.¹¹ This moves in the direction of a more adequate conception—one which keeps Scripture central, as it was for Wesley, and sees creation, tradition, reason, and experience as key sources that dynamically orbit around this center (to pick up on some helpful insights from Melvin Dieter).¹²

⁹ Barry Bryant notes the “pronounced aesthetic theme” in Wesley's doctrine of creation. See Barry Bryant, “John Wesley on the Origins of Evil,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30:1 (Spring 1995), 133, and the discussion in Jerry L. Walls, “‘As the Waters Cover the Sea’: John Wesley on the Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 13:4 (Oct. 1996), 537.

¹⁰ Luís Wesley de Souza, “‘The Wisdom of God in Creation’: Mission and the Wesleyan Pentalateral,” in Howard A. Snyder, ed., *Global Good News: Mission in a New Context* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 138–152.

¹¹ See De Souza's graphic, p. 143 of *Global Good News*.

¹² See the summary of Dieter's model in Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 16–20, 215f. Maddox says, “Wesley's so-called ‘quadrilateral’ of theological authorities could more adequately be described as a unilateral *rule* of Scripture within a trilateral *hermeneutic* of reason, tradition, and experience” (Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Kingswood, 1994], 46). I would say, rather: A unilateral or central rule of Scripture within a quadrilateral of creation, reason, tradition, and experience.

Wesley's central emphasis on the *image of God* was part of his understanding of creation. Man and woman are created in God's image. For Wesley, this is more than an affirmation about human worth or dignity (as it is often taken today). It has key redemptive implications. Since human beings bear God's image, even though marred by sin, they can be redeemed, healed, restored. Created in the divine image, men and women are "capable of God."¹³ That is, they have an inherent capacity for deep communion and companionship with God if the effects of sin can be overcome. This reality and dynamic is grounded in the biblical doctrine of creation.

According to Wesley, the whole created order in a more remote sense bears God's stamp and image. This was more particularly true of animate nature, where the wisdom of God was especially displayed. 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. (Wesley's interest in healing, in electricity, and in so-called paranormal phenomena should be seen in this context.) 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).

I would not claim that Wesley himself (and certainly not his heirs) fully overcame the spirit/matter dualism of classical Christian theology. He didn't. But he points us in the right direction with his oft-repeated stress on "all *inward* and *outward* holiness"; in his key theme of "justice, mercy, and truth"; and in his sensitivity to the created order, concern for physical healing and well-being, compassion for animals, even in his interest in gardens and

¹³ A phrase Wesley used repeatedly, especially in his sermon "The General Deliverance."

gardening. Especially does Wesley point us in the right direction in his vision for the restoration of the created order.¹⁴

Here Wesley shows remarkable ecological sensitivity. As Theodore Runyon notes, Wesley's view of the original harmony of the created order (to be restored in the new creation) is essentially "what today would be called *ecological balance*."¹⁵ Some of Wesley's ideas and speculations about the restoration of creation, as for instance in his sermon "The General Deliverance," may sound quaint and romantic. They should not for that reason be dismissed. We should note the theological move Wesley is making; the way he is extending salvation to the whole created order as he reflects on Romans 8:19–22.

Consider Wesley's logic in "The General Deliverance." His argument runs like this:

- I. Before the Fall, the brute creation was perfectly happy, more nearly resembling human beings. Humans were the great channel of communication and blessing between the Creator and the whole brute creation.
- II. As a result of the Fall, creation is subject to vanity—to sorrow, pain, evil, and death. This was by the wise permission of God who determines to draw eternal good out of this temporary evil. Now the creatures are deformed and alienated from humans.
- III. The brute creation will be redeemed and restored in God's final redemption. All creatures will share, according to their capacity, in the glorious liberty of the children of God, attaining a beauty and perfection far higher than they ever enjoyed— thus making amends for what they have suffered. The new earth will be "one perennial spring."

Three implications:

- A. This illustrates God's mercy to all his works.
- B. It provides an answer to the problem of creature suffering.
- C. It encourages us to show mercy to all God's creatures.

Wesley wrote, ". . . something better remains after death for these poor creatures [which] likewise, shall one day be delivered from this bondage of corruption, and shall then receive

¹⁴ Based on the KJV of Acts 3:21, Wesley envisioned, hoped for, and spoke of "the restitution [i.e., restoration] of all things." See, e.g., Sermon 4, "Scriptural Christianity," 3; Sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit," I.3.

¹⁵ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 10 (emphasis in the original).

an ample amends for all their present sufferings.” In view of God’s care and ultimate intent for his creation, we ourselves should “imitate him whose mercy is over all his works.”

Reflecting on God’s merciful intent of ultimate restoration should “soften our hearts towards the meaner creatures, knowing that the Lord careth for them.” Wesley argues, “It may enlarge our hearts towards those poor creatures, to reflect that, as vile as they appear in our eyes, not one of them is forgotten in the sight of our Father which is in heaven.”¹⁶

These accents in Wesley’s theology (even if not totally original with him) indicate an ecological sensitivity that clearly is relevant to a theology of mission today. They show the breadth and continuing promise of Wesley’s theology, even as we recognize Wesley’s limitations and blind spots. One significant area where I think Wesley did *not* overcome a non-biblical dualism is his theology of the kingdom of God. In my view, Wesley’s central focus on Christian perfection caused him to understand God’s kingdom too narrowly. Often Wesley virtually equates the kingdom of God with the experience of Christian perfection. Here E. Stanley Jones’ stress on the kingdom of God as “realism” provides from within the Wesleyan tradition a useful corrective.¹⁷

The Bible itself, properly interpreted with openness to the Holy Spirit, provides the cure to the distorting dichotomy between spirit and matter. I believe the Wesleyan Pentilateral offers profound insights, in terms of theological method, to help us rightly discern the Word of truth in our day. In particular, it helps us understand the important role of the created order in God’s plan of salvation and thus in Christian mission today.

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¹⁶ Wesley, Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” III.9, 10.

¹⁷ See the discussion in Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*; E. Stanley Jones, *Christ’s Alternative to Communism* (1933) and *Is the Kingdom of God Realism?* (1940). Jones came to see that the holiness movement in which he was raised had too narrow and too individualistic and interior an understanding of the kingdom of God. Yet his more comprehensive view of the kingdom did not go to the other extreme, as so often happens.