

Proposal for the 1993 Program

Wesleyan Theology and Eschatology

Introduction: I propose that we devote the 1993 annual meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society to the issue of eschatology and its relevance to Wesleyan theology. What follows is a rationale for and some preliminary suggestions of topics for a program devoted to this subject.

Rationale: The only biblical passage explicitly referring to entire sanctification (1 Thess. 5:23) does so in an eschatological context ("... at [en] the coming [parousia] of our Lord Jesus Christ" *NRSV*). Few papers presented at annual meetings of the Wesleyan Theological Society have even broached the subject of eschatology, and those only in a general way (e.g., Leo G. Cox, "'Straw' in the Believer -- I Corinthians 3:12," *WTJ* 12 [1977]: 34-38; Clarence L. Bence, "Processive Eschatology: A Wesleyan Alternative," *WTJ* 14, 1 [Spring 1979]: 45-59; David L. Cubie, "Toward a Wesleyan Theology of the Kingdom," *WTJ* 18, 1 [Spring 1983]: 100-114; Melvin E. Dieter, "The Development of Nineteenth Century Holiness Theology," *WTJ* 20, 1 [Spring 1985]: 61-77; Mortimer Arias, "The Kingdom of God," *WTJ* 23, 1 & 2 [Spring-Fall 1988]: 33-45). Only scant attention has been given to the place of *apocalyptic* eschatology in our discussions.

Ernst Käsemann probably overstated the case when he contended that apocalyptic was "the mother of Christian theology" ("On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969], p. 137). But there is no question that it has been on more than one occasion the central issue in "the mother of all battles" (to paraphrase Saddam Hussein) within and among the various Christian confessions across the past two millennia. H. Orton Wiley correctly described the "Second Advent . . . [as] one of the most delicate and controversial fields of theology" (*Christian Theology*, vol. 3 [Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1943], p. 243). The spectrum of opinion among the member and cooperating denominations of the Christian Holiness Association on the millennial issue alone bears witness to the divisiveness of eschatology. The question of how decisive it has been or should be in Wesleyan-holiness theology has not been adequately explored. H. Ray Dunning seems to contradict himself when he concedes that "eschatology is not an embarrassed addendum to theological work but is in the very warp and woof of the biblical message," and yet relegates his discussion to an appendix, because "eschatological issues" are "secondary to soteriological concerns and ancillary to essential matters of biblical faith" (*Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* [Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1988], p. 569). The time is ripe for the WTS to address courageously the issue of eschatology. Some of our members are beginning to do so. See, e.g., R. Larry Shelton and Alex R. G. Deasley, eds., *The Spirit and the New Age: An Inquiry into the Holy Spirit and Last Things from a Biblical Theological Perspective* (Wesleyan Theological Perspectives, vol. V [Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 1986]) and the expected 1993 release of the collection of essays edited by Dunning, *We Believe in the Second Advent: Wesleyan Scholars Address the Doctrine of Last Things* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City).

Eschatology not only impinges on the viability of the emphatic Wesleyan insistence on the possibility of entire sanctification "in this life," it has important implications for the timely issue Randy Maddox raised in his 1991 Presidential Address, that of particularism, pluralism, universalism. The clear biblical connections between eschatological faith and such doctrines as the resurrection from the dead, angelology-demonology, sin/salvation, eternal reward/retribution, ethical seriousness, and others suggest that the issue has implications well beyond end-times speculation.

Possible Topics: As the representative of "biblical scholars" on the executive committee, I propose that we give more than usual emphasis to the biblical foundations of eschatological thought, responsible Wesleyan interpretation(s) of significant Old and New Testament passages, and perhaps also to the contributions of non-canonical influences, including that of apocryphal/pseudepigraphal literature. Both exegetical studies and biblical-theological syntheses would be appropriate. I suspect that the incredibly diverse biblical treatments of the subject (prophetic and apocalyptic [both spanning at least five centuries each], the Synoptic Gospels/Jesus, Paul, deuterio-Paul, John, Luke-Acts, 2 Peter, Revelation, and others) provided the essential impetus for most of the various post-apostolic and even latter-day eschatological views.

The church historians/theologians among us could address such topics as the various millennial movements that have been incorporated within or excluded from the Christian mainstream or the factors that led to the very different shifts in millennial views in the Church of the Nazarene and the Church of God (Anderson, IN). Are you aware of small holiness sect peculiar to the south-eastern United States, called the Christ-Sanctified Holy Church whose distinguishing doctrine is the equation of the crisis moment of entire sanctification (= baptism with the Holy Spirit) and a realized-eschatological conception of "the Second Coming." Interestingly enough, some serious, contemporary biblical scholars have suggested that John's Gospel conceives of the coming of the Paraclete as the non-eschatological fulfillment of the primitive Christian parousia hope. Tantalizing thought?

As we approach the year 2000, are we likely to see a reoccurrence of the eschatological frenzy of 1000? A thorough study of the J. N. Darby--Plymouth Brethren--*Scofield Reference Bible*--D. L. Moody influence on dispensational premillennialism and its relationship to the rise of Millerite Adventism, Joseph Smith's Latter Day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses might prove interesting.

Bud Bence's study of the unreconciled eschatological tensions in Wesley's thought (realized and futuristic) might be extended to Adam Clarke (whose commentary identifies latter-day dates with biblical prophecies) and representative published Wesleyan scholar/theologians (Miley, Pope, Wiley, Hills, Dunning, Grider, and others). We would also do well to include an overview/critique of recent literature on the subject, both popular (sensational--Hal Lindsey et al. and sane--Jacques Ellul; cf. the theological assessment of such influential popular evangelical writers as James Dobson, David Seamands, Charles Swindoll, Charles Stanley, and Gordon MacDonald in the article by Wendy Kaminer [a self-professed

"skeptical, secular humanist, Jewish, feminist, intellectual"] in *Theology Today* 48 [1991]: 301-325) and scholarly (Niebuhr, Tillich, Bultmann, Moltmann, Pannenberg, and others [You'll have to help me here. I'm not a theologian]).

A more systematic treatment of the various theological options and their implications for the distinctive concerns of Wesleyan-holiness theology would also be useful. The issue of social activism vs. piety in relation to eschatological convictions could be explored from a historical or sociological perspective. Does apocalyptic eschatology engender an "escapist mentality" or does it serve as "a catalyst for resistance and change," calling for "allegiance to a higher authority," and providing "visions of a better world" (Mitchell G. Reddish, ed., *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1990], p. 26)?

Keynote Speaker: If we are to continue the recent tradition of inviting a "scholar celebrity" as a keynote speaker (and I think we need to discuss this), I propose that we consider a biblical scholar. I have no particularly good contacts, but some possible names come to mind (in alphabetical order): Adela Yarbo Collins, John Collins, James H. Charlesworth, James D. G. Dunn, Paul D. Hanson, George W. E. Nickelsburg, and Christopher Rowland. Tom Sine (who has connections with Seattle Pacific University) is a responsible popularist who has taken seriously the relation between biblical eschatology and social action (*The Mustard Seed Conspiracy* [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1981]). I am open to other suggestions.

Alternatives: I have no particular vested interest in these proposals. This is simply the one I have most fully fleshed out. Other themes/topics that I have tossed around in my mind include a consideration of the relationship between methodology and theology, the biblical doctrine of creation and Creationism, election, a reconsideration of original sin, justification by faith, the failures of practical/institutional expressions of Wesleyan-holiness theology (paternalism, racism, sexism, materialism, militarism, intellectualism/anti-intellectualism, homogenism [à la modern Church-Growth movement], etc.). Again, I am open to your critique and suggestions.

Call for Papers: I would appreciate your guidance in formulating our call for papers and suggestions of potential presenters within our membership that I should personally invite to submit proposals.

George Lyons
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