

Proposal for the 1997 meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society

FROM UNREPENTED SINS TO INCURABLE DISEASES:

Wesleyan Incarnational Spirituality in a Nominalist Culture

by

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Nominalism, the proposition "that there are no universal essences in reality, and that the mind can frame no single concept or image corresponding to any general term," is undoubtedly the premise of both the secular and religious dialog of our time. This is not a new development. In practice, the disposition to ignore the essence and to look only on the exterior of ideas and things was as much the modus operandi of everyday discourse in Wesley's day as it is in ours.

Wesley and his followers built on foundations already laid. They proclaimed "the central idea of Christianity," content in the belief that such foundations were secure. Until quite recently, it was generally believed that there was indeed reality behind the "name." What has changed is that today most people are not too sure. Now even nominalism is threatened by the Post-Modernist lack of consensus concerning every particular. Today the incarnational theology on which Wesleyanism, indeed all vital Christianity is built, is decidedly out of intellectual and popular fashion.

In the proposed paper I would like to deal with present-day aspects of the dilemma of Wesleyan commitment to incarnation of "full salvation" in an age which regards all behavior as morally neutral and in which Christians of all stripes, factions and opinions increasingly talk as if such incarnation were not what Christ suffered for "without the gate." In brief, I would like to discuss the relation between the first and second clauses of I Thessalonians 4:3: "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain from fornication," not merely in terms of external consequences and ramifications but in terms of "incarnation." I use fornication here as symbol of all things possible of "incarnation." These things the nominalist rhetoric designates as "disease." Often alleged to be genetically determined, such transgressions are thereby made morally neutral, unforgivable as sins and incurable as diseases.

All Wesleyans are vocally "nominalists" but silently and essentially "realists." Given the fact that dialog is inevitably begun in nominalist terms (or gravitates in that direction), there is need continually to seek redirection. Pejorative terms, innuendo and learned distinctions dot the nominalist landscape.

(In the latter category, for example, I've noticed recently the tendency to confuse mere liveliness for the Holy Spirit and to use Holy Spirit without the definite article, thus strengthening the conception of the divine as impersonal.) In breeching the subject, one becomes a potential target. The perpetual tendency is to side step the introspective and to label as legalistic things which in nominalist terms may be just that, but which in reality are incarnational. Because both good and bad are capable of incarnation, the crucial question is which will be.

Let me give an example of the kind of behavioral issue I would like to explore: the nominalist bent in us all to incarnate something other than the Spirit of God. The example is the long-standing collective Holiness conviction against use of tobacco which preachers and parents generally inferred (in nominalist terms) to be injurious to one's health and "evil." A Holiness boy I know, who in rebellion against his early training took up smoking, discovered instead that it was a matter of incarnation. He quit after it came to him that one who smoked was a "smoker."

The purpose of the paper is not to reiterate the myriad of "realist" issues underlying nominalist rhetoric. It is rather to attempt something of a consciousness raising about being "the temple of the Holy Spirit" in a society skeptical of anything transcending personal consciousness either in this world or the world to come.