

**Power/Knowledge: Foucault, Power and the Possibility of Emancipatory Theological Discourse**

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In this paper, I seek to attend to the specific problematic of the conference themes by looking at the notion of power and its effects in light of the question: How does theology in the Wesleyan tradition speak of emancipation and reconciliation in the context of the current structures of power? The paper will seek to be an examination of Foucault's poststructuralist account of power, its implications for a proper analysis of power and reflections towards a contextualized theological response.

The paper will proceed in the following way:

First, Foucault's critique of the dominant views of power will be explicated. Foucault takes on the notion of power as primarily a juridical force seen as control and expressed in the arbitrary action of the agent. In the light of this view, power is opposed by wresting it away from those using it illegitimately and using it in a more humane way. This informs much modern political discourse as well as various forms of theological reflection on power. Foucault critiques this view which sees power as repressive and begins to elaborate on how power produces effects as well as represses. This productive outgrowth of power forms and shapes subjectivity. He refrains from the question "Who has the power and what has he in mind?" Instead, he seeks to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of forces.

Next, we will look at the specific application of Foucault's critique in the contexts of racism and women's oppression. Cornel West offers a profound thick description of the genealogy of modern racism drawing on Foucault and is illustrative of how Foucault's critique enlightens the complexity of addressing issues of emancipation and reconciliation in simple binary terms of overcoming a *bad* structure and replacing it with a *good* one. We will also look at the feminist engagement with this critique and its implications for understanding the dynamics of the oppression of women in a patriarchal society.

Finally, the paper will turn on the implications of a view of power as productive. These implications include the realization that any discourse of reconciliation cannot simply proclaim an alternate structure to the present one that simply implies the ability to step out of the present context. Instead Foucault problematizes the idea that we have semi-stable, natural states of being and the solution of simply transcending history in pursuit of some extra-historical ending. This critical practice does not allow us to escape into the false transcendence of metaphysics, metahistory, or any grand theory from which to critique patriarchy or racism from "outside." Instead, it focuses the inquiry on mundane historical consequences closest to the inquirer. For me, as a white male theologian, the inquiry turns on what is closest: the formation of the self as privileged on the backs of the oppressed. To overturn this one must submit to the making optional of one's subjectivity. This is the total loss of control in the rendering optional of one's subjectivity to open up the possibility of being radically overturned. Perhaps, though, it is in losing one's life that one finds, or continues to fine one's life.

This last section hints at the potential theological import of this analysis of power for addressing the themes of emancipation and reconciliation. Is a rush to reconciliation an overlooking of the continued existence of the structures of power which ultimately expose these reconciliations as surface displays which leave entrenched structures untouched by the power of disruptive grace? The paper will argue that this analysis gives theological construction from the Wesleyan spirit a way to bring to bear its unique emphases in ways that speak to the deep embedded nature of that which frustrates our hopes for reconciliation. This critique, which exposes a transcendental attempt to bring extra-historical realities to bear on reconciliation as oppressive, gives potential to do "practical theology" by immersion in the analysis of power's productive formation of subjectivity and the grace of a God whose sanctifying spirit seeks to reconcile all to the image of God.