

Dean G. Blevins, WTS 2001 paper proposal:  
**"Contagion Christians and Resident Clones:  
Discernment and Power in the Marketplace of Ministry**



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Contemporary strategies for engagement and formation in the Church are currently besieged by a host of poor interpretations and destructive applications. The current evangelistic movement, the Contagious Christian, includes the possibility of Christians deprecating or sacrificing their own credibility as they succumb to cultural pressure outside the Church (forfeiting its power for transformation). The current formative movement, Resident Aliens, also includes the possibility of Christians exercising coercive measures as they succumb to cultural pressure within the Church (abusing its power for transformation). As Wesleyans there is a need to affirm transformative power both for engaging the larger culture and for forming Christian community. This dual movement may be defined historically (in Wesley's mission) and biblically for we can only engage the culture as Christians, however, we can only understand the Christian community in light of the oblation of Christ who "engaged" culture for our behalf. The Wesleyan call to discern legitimate strategies is also a part of Wesley's practice and method.<sup>1</sup> The challenge for Wesleyans is to develop some criteria by which discernment can be exercised. This proposal is an extension of an earlier work that moves to suggest criteria based upon narrative moral theology, ritual studies and critical pedagogy.<sup>2</sup> While drawing upon earlier work, this paper is designed to advance a new, constructive method for future ministry decisions.

Following an introduction, the paper will present the problem through some extreme (but true) illustrations of poor interpretation and application. A very brief overview of the problem, drawing partially upon earlier work, will be employed to explain the implications of either misinterpretation (contagion or clone) in light of the faithful exercise of power for the sake of transformation. The call for discernment will also be briefly explored (based upon earlier work) only to set the stage for the search for a criteria to avoid both form of abuse. The criteria offered should help Wesleyans discern if any approach is truly transformative rather than self-deprecating or debilitating (one abuse of power) or coercive (the other abuse of power). I will argue that an authentic approach to transformative power should meet a three-fold criteria.

- 1) The ability to practice humility and so resist an internal sense of exactitude by recognizing the biblical narrative's witness toward misuse.
- 2) The ability to provide for ritual empowerment (true liturgy) versus harboring ritual mastery (liturgical separation and hierarchy).
- 3) The ability to practice hospitality so that the perspective of the "outsider" or "stranger" always includes the possibility of affirmation or critique.

Upon establishing the criteria I will suggest possible responses to both extremes of "Contagion Christians" and "Resident Clones" that provide a way to discern a more authentic Wesleyan approach to the dual movements of engagement and formation.

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<sup>1</sup> Dean G. Blevins, *John Wesley and the Means of Grace: An Approach to Christian Religious Education* (Chicago: UMI, 1999) 370-80.

<sup>2</sup> Dean G. Blevins, "Resident Aliens and the Exercise of Power: Toward a Wesleyan Postmodern Education," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*; 34, no. 2 (Fall 1999), 175-94.