

bridges, be sensitive to others' needs, to relate well to people of all backgrounds and origins must be good news. The encouragement to reach out to others in love is far healthier spiritually than to become wholly preoccupied with one's own spiritual condition, which is a form of self-centredness.

Christian perfection may not be attainable in this life except perhaps in a relative sense, but it is the goal to which all Christians look; it can inspire within us a positive attitude of love towards God and neighbour and remains a main plank of our faith.

Social Righteousness

Much modern criticism of traditional Methodism has been that it is too personal and individualistic. In the past there used to be fairly general agreement that to change society, there was the prior need to change people. Today, there is a strongly held view amongst some that if political and economic structures were more just and equitable, people would have a healthier and better

environment to grow in every way, for what hinders people in personal growth is oppressive political structures and a lack of basic rights. Thus, change the structures, and you will have better people.

That is a highly debatable question. The truth of the matter is that both individuals and the structures of society need to be changed and these things should be happening in parallel. Wesley was concerned with both personal change and social change.

His interest in education is seen in his starting of schools. His Journal contains a short account of the founding of Kingswood School "to teach chiefly the poorer children to read, write and cast accounts."

Wesley's concern for the general physical health and well-being is seen in the publication of his *Primitive Physick* in 1747, even though some of his suggested cures may seem quaint and very primitive.

Supremely, his social awareness and concern are expressed in his opposition to slavery. In October 1787 he wrote to Granville Sharp protesting his "perfect detestation of

the horrid slave-trade," and the last letter Wesley wrote on 24 February 1791 was a final protest against "that execrable villany, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature." This letter to William Wilberforce encouraged the abolitionist in the fight against slavery and included this exhortation, "Go on, in the name of God and the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it."

There can be no doubt that for John Wesley his personal religion had to find expression in a social context. For him, social righteousness was the outworking of personal holiness. Christians of all persuasions need such an emphasis today.

W. R. Davies is president of the Methodist Conference of Great Britain and is referred to as occupying Wesley's Chair. Copyright © 1988 by *International Christian Digest*. All rights reserved.

Wesleyan Theology and the Feminist Critique

RANDY L. MADDOX

The Wesleyan tradition, in both its Methodist and Holiness forms, is generally considered to have played an instrumental, role in the modern struggle to affirm women in Christian ministry.

Many of the apparent feminist actions of Wesley and his followers were instituted *in spite of* some of their central biblical and theological affirmations. Wesley allowed women to preach. However, Wesley did this despite the fact that he was convinced it was contrary to the *normative* teaching of Scripture. At first he justified women speakers by means of a questionable distinction between "testifying" and "preaching." Eventually, he simply appealed to the obvious giftedness of the women and God's blessing of

their ministry as evidence that God did allow women preachers in "extraordinary" situations such as his revival.

This "qualified" endorsement of women's ministries undoubtedly formed the background for the subsequent embarrassment about and resulting marginalization or denial of women's ministries in both the Methodist and Holiness traditions as they became "establishment" churches. It is easier for a Wesleyan to dialogue with or appropriate the feminist perspective than for members of other traditions such as Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. The Wesleyan tradition shares a distinctively kindred theological spirit with contemporary Christian feminists. The two movements are attuned in their most

fundamental convictions, as the following nine areas indicate.

The Nature of Theology

Christian feminists emphasize the praxis-related and constructive nature of all theological expressions. All theological formulations are fallible and thus continually open to critical reformulation.

The founder and central stream of the tradition have likewise opted for a more praxis-related and constructive model of theology. They have often been judged pejoratively because of this option.

The Sources of Theology

The primary feminist concerns regarding the sources of theology are

two: 1) that we self-consciously admit the role that experience, reason, and tradition play in our reading of Scripture—thereby shattering any “Bible-only” pretensions; and 2) that we attempt to recover and utilize the neglected areas of *women’s* experience and tradition in our theological reflection.

The Wesleyan tradition is sympathetic with the first concern, having long given at least lip-service to the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” (Scripture, experience, reason, tradition). We have not yet, however, addressed adequately the exclusion of women’s experience and traditions in our theological reflection.

The Doctrine of God (Father/Creator)

It is popularly assumed that feminist theologians want to replace worship of the male God (Father) with that of the Goddess (Mother). This is clearly *not* the concern of most Christian feminist theologians. Rather, they are primarily interested in reaffirming the classical theological doctrine that *all* language about God is analogical, including the designation “Father.” *Neither* gender should be

attributed to God in any literal sense. On the other hand, *both* male and female analogies for God have biblical warrant and provide instructive disclosures of truth about God’s relationship to humanity.

In addition to this basic concern, feminists are critical of certain traditional theological models of God. In particular, they reject models that are hierarchal and abstract such as “First Cause” and “World Governor.” Even more specifically, they reject any hierarchal understanding of God’s omnipotence which construes it as *power over*, opting instead for a more egalitarian understanding of power as *power for* or enabling power. In each of these cases they argue their alternative model is both more biblical and more inclusive of women’s experience which, focuses more on relationships and empowering than on authority and independence.

Wesleyan theologians can make no claims to having consistently remained conscious of the analogical status of God-language. Nor have they been distinctively suspicious of abstract and hierarchal models of God. However, the protest against absolutistic understandings of God’s omnipotence which undercut human

responsibility is at the heart of Wesleyanism.

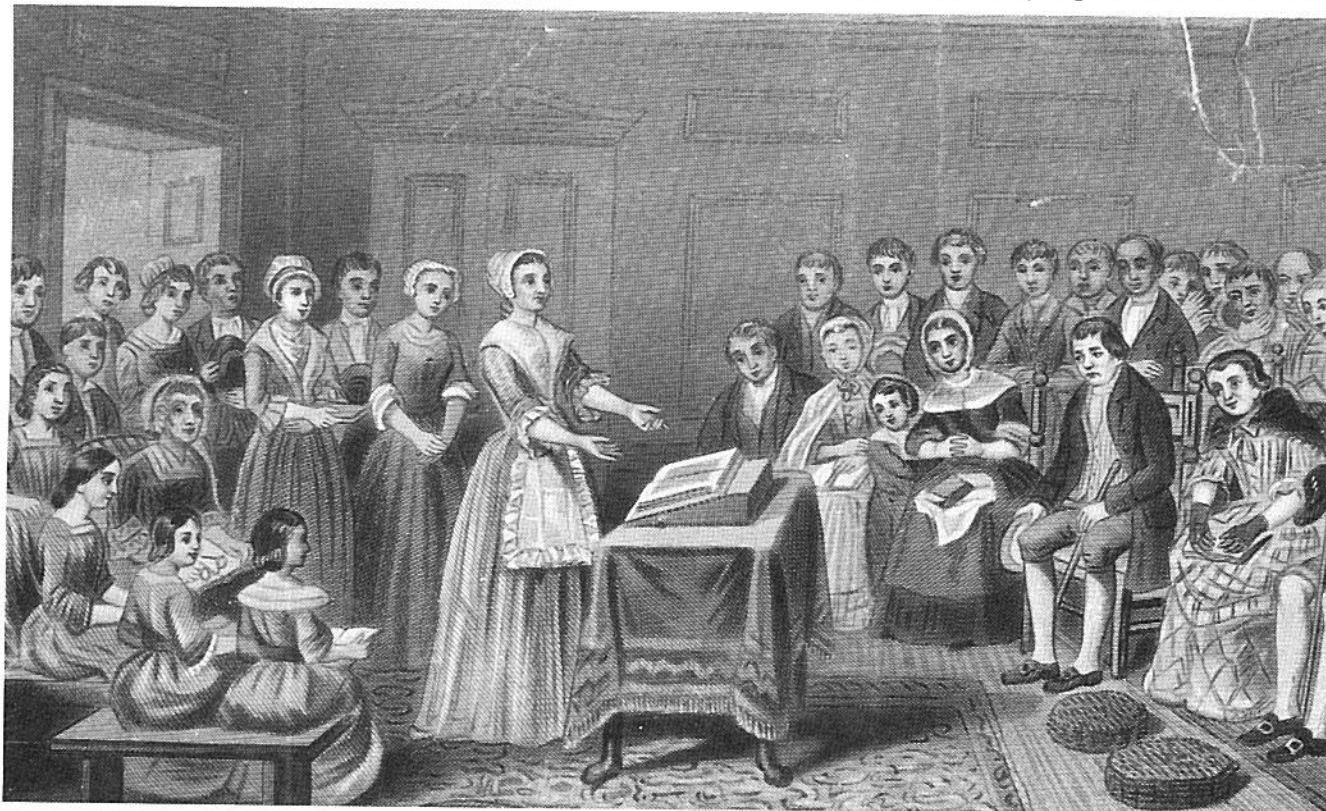
The Doctrine of Christ

Feminists are suspicious of abstract and authoritarian models of Christ. Their model of preference is Christ as representative—*both* representative of God to humanity and representative of true humanity. Implicit in this model is a rejection of any substitution soteriology that would undercut our human responsibility to become ourselves. Also they have struggled with the question of how women can relate to or find themselves represented by a male savior. While a few have appealed to the idea of androgyny in this regard, the majority have instead insisted that Christ maleness, while a historical fact, was not a theological or soteriological necessity.

At most, one could argue a basic shared sympathy for avoiding models of soteriology that undercut human responsibility.

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

In the history of Christian tradition the Holy Spirit has often been



Susannah Wesley, John’s mother, addressing neighbors at Epworth rectory

conceived as female, both analogical-ly and literally. Feminist theologians resist any literal identification of the Spirit as female, because of their understanding of the analogical nature of God-language, while they appreciate female *models* of God as Spirit. However, even this appreciation has a limit if these female models are used to "feminize" the Spirit. Feminists argue that the Spirit has all-too-often been construed as quiet, recessive and dependent. By contrast, they find in Scripture an understanding of the Spirit as the Power of the very Presence of God.

The other major concern is to emphasize that the Spirit's work is inclusive; the Spirit gives *both* the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit to *both* women and men.

While not without some reservations, feminists have generally found the Wesleyan emphasis on the transforming power of the Spirit and the Wesleyan recognition of the inclusive nature of the gifts to be exemplary of a proper understanding.

The Doctrine of Humanity

Christian feminists argue that the patriarchalism in Scripture is descriptive of *sinful* human life and that the clear call of the Word of God is to egalitarian relationships.

They consider traditional (male) understandings of humanity to be individualistic, abstract and alienating. By contrast, they argue that a truly inclusive and biblical anthropology would construe humanity in intrinsically social and relational terms. We are human only in and through relationships with God, others, self, and world.

Wesleyan tradition has an ambivalent history regarding male/female relationships, but careful exegetical study can convince us and our people that God's Word calls unambiguously for egalitarian relationships.

The situation of Wesley himself is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, he has been accused by feminist and liberation theologians of having an incurably individualistic anthropology. On the other hand, many Wesleyans argue that the primacy of the category of love in Wesley's theology suggests a fundamental relational perspective.

The Doctrine of Sin

Resisting the privatistic, dualistic and individualistic definitions that are so common in Christian tradition and piety, Christian feminists stress the social, structural, and systematic forms that sin can take. Ultimately, sin is anything that dehumanizes us and leads us to dehumanize others. Such evils can easily become institutionalized or socially embodied.

Feminists have also alerted us to the contextuality of sin. They have shown that the particular forms of sinful destruction of relationships can vary relative to male or female experience, rich or poor, slave or free.

The emphasis on the social and structural nature of sin highlights another paradox in Wesley. On the one hand, he was very concerned about particular social evils of his day such as slavery and alcoholism. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly true that Wesley was unable to see the structural nature of the problems with which he was trying to grapple, and that his sensitivity to the social evil of patriarchy in particular was not very keen.

The Doctrine of Redemption

Feminists reject any type of cosmic, social or individual determinism or predestination that would undercut human responsibility for engaging in reformist activity. God may be the ultimate source of all redemption, but God calls us to become responsible mediators of that redemption.

Feminists also stress the wholistic and social nature of redemption. For them, conversion is never simply an inner "spiritual" affair. It is a turning of the entire person from a dehumanizing way of life to a liberating and serving way of life. Moreover, salvation deals with more than the conversion of individuals. Distorted social structures must also be re-deemed.

This is the point of affinity between Christian feminism and the Wesleyan tradition that is most often mentioned. The emphasis on sanctification as a real transformation is one of the most distinctive elements of Wesleyanism. Moreover, Wesley constantly stressed that this transformation was not simply personal; it

had social implications. It must be admitted that Wesley formulated these implications almost totally in terms of social *service*, not social *transformation*. While the emphasis on perfection or holiness per se may be *implicitly* reformist, feminists would encourage Wesleyans to make it more explicit and systematic.

The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

An obvious feminist concern in relation to ecclesiology is the defense of the participation of women in all areas of ministry, including the ministry of Word and sacrament. However, their most fundamental concerns lie deeper than this. Ultimately, they see the exclusion of women from ministry as simply one of the many destructive and self-crippling effects of traditional hierarchal and clerical conceptions of church and ministry. Feminists consider all such hierarchal models to be unbiblical and dehumanizing. They reject any type of clergy/laity distinction that overlooks the variety of ministries present in the whole community and that makes laity dependent on clergy. Their clear preference is for models of church and ministry which emphasize empowerment and service rather than exclusiveness and authority.

Such concerns are obviously not foreign to the Wesleyan tradition. Indeed, Wesleyans were among the first in the modern age to ordain women. Likewise, it could easily be argued that Wesley's classes and the holiness prayer-meetings and revivals were often egalitarian and mutually empowering arenas for ministry.

The Christian feminist critique could help the Wesleyan tradition to rethink many of its practices and convictions with the goal of making them more biblical, more inclusive and more faithful to our vision of the coming reign of God. Other traditions can benefit, as well.

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