

A PROPOSAL FOR A CONSULTATION
ON THEOLOGY, CHURCH, AND CULTURE
IN WESLEYAN AND PENTECOSTAL TRADITIONS

It is readily acknowledged that there is a resemblance between Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal movements. At the very least there is a way of thinking about God, grace, and salvation that links these movements historically and theologically.

What we see in these movements is an apparent recurring pattern. There is a theology that is centered on salvation through Jesus Christ and understands that salvation to be a present transformation in this life. They emphasize the power of the Holy Spirit, and the teleological nature of salvation in terms of gradual and/or instantaneous works of God subsequent to conversion, whose content is sanctification, empowerment, or both. Grace is thought of in relational terms. Their adherents experienced the power of a transcendent God in everyday life, sometimes accompanied by visions, dreams, bodily manifestations, and especially healing. They were highly evangelistic yet in varying ways and degrees also concerned with ministry to the poor. Their communities manifested something of the Kingdom of God in that they were markedly more equalitarian than the surrounding culture with regard to gender, race, and class, and often provided opportunities for leadership for persons who were marginalized by society.

The subsequent history of many of these movements, especially in the Western world, has been that of a gradual accommodation to culture. The poor may remain objects of ministry but are no longer partners in ministry. Congregations and even denominations begin to form along class and racial lines. Women tend to be barred from leadership. The expectancy of divine transformation and healing is dampened or even abandoned, as is confident evangelistic outreach.

At least partial exceptions to this trend might be found in African-American Methodism, the "Sanctified Church," Hispanic Pentecostalism, and Pentecostal and some Wesleyan movements in the two-thirds world.

Theologically these movements constitute a distinctive family. They are evangelical but are quite different from Protestant scholasticism. They are experiential but in ways unlike Protestant liberalism. They often begin as movements of the poor and marginalized but their theology and practice is at best both like and unlike liberation theology. They potentially offer a fresh theological approach that integrates Spirit and word, vital piety and social justice, tradition and contextualization, and formation and mission.

There have been a number of studies of the various strands of this theological family by cultural historians, historical and systematic theologians, and sociologists. Yet there has not been a thoroughgoing interdisciplinary examination of the family as a whole. What is needed is a sustained conversation among persons working in these various areas.

THE ISSUES

Among the issues such a conversation could address are these:

- (1) Is there a distinctive approach to doing theology which is common to these movements? For example, is the integration of orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and orthopathy that some have seen in Wesley's theology a common feature of all the movements?
- (2) Is there a distinctive shape to the theology, or a common set of concerns? For example, what is the role of the Holy Spirit, or the understanding of salvation, or of eschatology?
- (3) How are gospel and culture related?
- (4) Is there a connection between the emphasis on free grace, holiness and/or power, and egalitarian tendencies or holistic witness?
- (5) Very importantly, why the eventual cultural accommodation? Is this an inevitable consequence of "redemption and lift"? Or could this be avoided—*has* it been avoided—and if so, how?

This is simply an initial list. I am confident we could both expand it and more carefully nuance the issues listed.

THE PROPOSAL

That we assemble about 12 persons to meet once a year over a five year period to study these issues. The participants would represent historical, theological, and sociological disciplines and have expertise in one or more of the movements.

As a way of focusing our study I propose we include the following members of this Wesleyan and Pentecostal family:

John Wesley and Eighteenth Century Methodism in England
 Early American Methodism
 African-American Methodism
 The Holiness Movement
 The Early Pentecostal Movement
 The Sanctified Church (African-American Holiness and Pentecostal)
 Hispanic Pentecostalism
 Global Pentecostalism

This would not preclude our drawing on other aspects such as pietist roots, charismatic movements, world Methodism, and the like. But it would enable us to pursue issues of commonality and distinctiveness over a range of theologies, cultures, and historical periods.

I do not know if funding for such a project is possible. It has been suggested by persons on both coasts that Kansas City would be a good place to meet because it is a central location, and five potential participants either live there or are in driving distance.

WHAT IS NEEDED

- (1) Expressions of interest in this project. If it is otherwise possible, would you be interested in becoming a participant?
- (2) Ideas to further shape the content and direction of the project. What should we be studying, and toward what ends?
- (3) Ideas on funding, where to meet, when to meet, etc.—all the practical matters for such a project.
- (4) What should be the outcome of this study? A collection of essays in book form? A jointly written work? Several works? How can the results be conveyed to both scholars and church?