

Signs of Hope In Contemporary United Methodist Theology

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Assessments of the state of theology in American Methodism through its history have most frequently take the form of laments! Voices from a variety of perspectives are taking the same tone in assessing United Methodism today, but I would like to offer a counter note. Without denying our difficulties, I also discern some hopeful developments in the discussions of the nature and task of theology in United Methodist contexts. At the moment, these signs of hope are like “a small cloud, the size of a man’s hand” (1 Kings 18:44), but they bear the potential of a rejuvenating rain. To explain this potential, let me place the signs in historical perspective.

Quest for Respectability and Relevance

The theologians of early American Methodism were absorbed with the quest for respectability in theological circles. The center of this quest was developing a scholastic theology (i.e., a comprehensive, systematically-arranged summary and defense of Methodist teaching) as detailed as that of their Presbyterian competitors, since they assumed that this was “real” theology and that Wesley had made a lamentable oversight in not providing them with one.

Ironically, no sooner was this need met—in works from Thomas Ralston to John Miley—then the focus of lament shifted to the lack of relevance and sophistication of scholastic theology when judged by the Enlightenment criteria of the broader academic arena. In response, Methodist theologians transferred their energies to catching up in the apologetic task of defending the method of theology and the content of the Christian worldview within the modern academy. In the process, “real” theology was increasingly equated with philosophical apologetics, a move epitomized by Methodist Liberalism and Boston Personalism at the turn to the Twentieth Century.

Meanwhile, society at large began adding its questions about the relevance of theology to those of the academy. By this point Methodists were at the forefront of theological trends, lamenting the preoccupation of traditional theology with issues other than (or supposedly antithetical to) the Social Gospel. This led several to redefine “real” theology once more, this time making social ethics the focal theological concern.

The reaction of neo-Orthodoxy at mid-century turned its lament precisely toward the way that these earlier redefinitions were distracting theological attention from the task of doctrinal construction within the community of faith. But this reaction was taken in stride and soon disregarded in most Methodist academic circles. As such, the assumption that apologetics and/or social ethics are the most significant theological tasks remains widespread among United Methodists—a fact evidenced by the prevalence of process theology and various liberation theologies in the systematic theology departments of our colleges and seminaries.

Costly Split

Undeniably, the resulting predominance of attention given to these tasks has generated many important insights. But these benefits have come at some cost. The most significant cost is that this preoccupation has widened the split between academic theology and the church. In the minds of most United Methodist pastors and people “theology” has become identified with concerns and forms of expression that have little obvious connection to the task of shepherding the formation of Christian disciples in the community of faith (i.e., fulfilling the denomination’s stated mission!). Meanwhile, United Methodist theologians find our identity and accountability more readily in professional guilds than in the church, and few of our works are read outside of the academy.

So where are the signs of hope? They are signaled in a changing evaluation of the developments just traced; what had earlier been heralded as the “coming of age” of Methodist theology is increasingly viewed as more like its adolescence. That is to say, earlier Methodist theology is

judged to have been too dominated by peer pressure, and to have bought uncritically into some questionable scholastic and Enlightenment assumptions. Perhaps the most important assumption now widely called into question is the hierarchical bifurcation—as opposed to dynamic interrelation—of theory and practice reflected in the tendency of Methodist scholastics like Samuel Wakefield to treat Christian life and ethics as the subsequent “application” of doctrinal truths determined on prior theoretical grounds, or (in a reverse hierarchy) the tendency of Methodist liberals like H.F. Rall to reduce doctrine to a derivative “articulation” of the truths discovered and/or validated in the practice of Christian life.

Whichever way the hierarchy was ordered, such bifurcations were a major force in the separation of “theoretical” academic theology from the “practical” life of the church. This makes it very significant that the majority of contemporary United Methodist theologians would affirm instead the integrated conviction of *both* the essential contribution of Christian practice to framing the Christian worldview (the basic Christian assumptions about the nature of God, humanity, and our interrelationship) *and* the indispensable contribution of the Christian worldview to enabling and guiding Christian practice. This conviction is leading them to explore ways of developing an understanding and practice of theology as a truly practical discipline; that is, a discipline focused on the task of forming and norming the worldview/character of believers living out their lives as members of the community of faith within the larger world.

Wesley as Theologian

Among the unexpected places to which this exploration has taken them is a renewed interest in Wesley as a theologian! For all their homage to Wesley as the founder of their movement, Methodist theologians dismissed him early on as an exemplar for their own activity—because he did not conform to the academic standards that they were concerned to satisfy. In Wesley’s choice to leave Oxford in order to shepherd the Methodist movement, they typically saw a choice to leave serious theological work. But many today are proposing the alternative judgment that Wesley’s choice was very much in keeping with the classic Anglican ideal of the pastor/theologian actively shepherding a community of believers in the world, in part by providing them with those serious “first-order” theological materials most geared to forming believers in the Christian worldview—namely, liturgies, catechisms, hymns, sermons, and the like. More importantly, a growing number of United Methodist theologians are drawing on Wesley’s example as a guide for transforming our contemporary understanding and practice of theology (to mention only a few: Thomas Langford, Douglas Meeks, Don Saliers, Geoffrey Wainwright, and my own work).

The transformation that we are suggesting calls upon both the church and the academy to take more seriously the practical-theological task of forming Christian worldview/character, and the materials and practices associated with this task. Pastors, Christian educators, and worship leaders are being encouraged to recognize the truly theological nature of their work, and to pursue it with appropriate care. Meanwhile, the academy is being encouraged to resist identifying theology more properly with such specialized activities (and their characteristic forms of publication) as defense of theological methodology, apologetic dialogue with modern science, or construction of philosophical metaphysics, than with the overarching task of discerning and forming authentically-Christian life.

It is the “small cloud” of progress toward this transformed understanding and practice of theology that gives me hope of a rejuvenating rain. If it can be carried through, it would help address the widely lamented lack of theological formation of United Methodist laity (and many clergy!). Likewise, its implicit rehabilitation of Wesley’s theological seriousness would increase the chance of his descendants (and the wider church) benefitting from the rich resources in his theology—such as his distinctive balancing of God’s gracious prevenience with our responsible participation and his holistic view of the nature of salvation.

Of course, a promising cloud also has the potential to degenerate into a dry-lightening storm, spreading destruction rather than life. The area where I most sense this danger at present, ironically, is in the appeals to Wesley for warrant within United Methodist debates over doctrinal standards. One side in these debates focuses on Wesley as a “confessional” authority, and proposes legislating conformity to this authority. In reaction, others construe Wesley’s affirmation of a “catholic spirit” in a manner that obscures his clear theological convictions and concern. What I find missing in both camps is Wesley’s emphasis on the importance of theological formation and “conferencing.” Doctrinal integrity and agreement will not be achieved in United Methodism by either legislation or mere irenicism, but only through engagement in the type of practical-theological formation and conversation that can nurture a gradual consensus among the faithful. Let us pray for the rejuvenating rain that can nourish the sprouts of such activity that are present among us!