

Leaning Both Ways at Once:  
Methodist Evangelistic Mission at the Intersection of Church and World

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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**ABSTRACT**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation suggests that a Methodist theology of evangelistic mission requires placement within an account of ecclesiology and the theological distinction of Church and world. It argues for a vision of the Church not as the environment for or instrument of evangelistic mission, but rather as a visible, practicing, and witnessing “People” in, but not of the world. Such a People appear as Christians engage both the practices of intra-ecclesial formation and extra-ecclesial engagement with the “other half of the reconciling event” in the world, at the same time, *leaning both ways at once*.

In this equipoise the Church pursues evangelistic mission along a path between ecclesial accommodation for the sake of cultural relevance in the world (understatement) on the one hand, and ecclesial self-absorption that locates witness in an aesthetic display of holiness to the world (overstatement) on the other. Constructively, I argue that the pursuit of this evangelistic mission along this paradoxical path is best envisioned as a practice of intercession. Intercession names the stance of the People of the Church between formation and mission, between tradition and innovation, between God and the world, leaning both ways at once. Throughout I argue that these concerns are not foreign to but stem from Methodist traditions of theology and practice and address a need in the contemporary United Methodist Church for deeper ecclesiological reflection and clarity regarding the shape of faithful evangelistic mission.

The argument begins in Chapter 1 with a review of several contemporary voices in Methodist theology of evangelism, considering the presence (or lack thereof) of the theological relationship of the Church and the world and identifying those who

“understate” and those who “overstate” that relationship. In Chapter 2, I ask, “What is the agency of the world?” as a means to engage the lack of theological reflection on the formative influence of the principalities and powers in contemporary (understated) theologies of evangelism. Given the agency of the powers mediated through the example of the modern market-state, I argue for the crucial role of intra-ecclesial formation within contemporary Methodist theology of evangelistic mission. Anticipating the challenge that such a turn to formation tends to favor an overstated differentiation of Church and world, I turn in Chapter 3 to an engagement with John Howard Yoder and the Methodist tradition in order to answer the question: “What is the agency of the Church?” Resisting a reading of Yoder that locates the Church’s agency for evangelistic mission in an (overstated) form of aesthetic witness offered to a watching world, I offer a reading of Yoder that locates ecclesial identity in a particular Peoplehood sent to the world to discern and name the alliances between Church and world that reveal the truth of God’s reconciliation with the world through Christ. In the final two chapters, I seek to develop an account of Methodist ecclesial identity that “leans both ways” between being a “People called Methodist” formed by the practices of Wesley’s *General Rules* (Chapter 4) and, at the same time, a People shaped via the evangelistic mission of intercession in the world, an image borrowed from the theological vision of Rowan Williams (Chapter 5).

Taken together, these chapters argue for a location of evangelistic mission in the Church as a Peoplehood, a politics constantly in formation, engaging the “other half of the reconciling event” and extending “unrestricted communion” as it serves an

intercessory role, standing between God and the world. I conclude with reflection on the impact of such theological vision on the ecclesiology and missiology of the contemporary United Methodist Church in the United States, suggesting the expression of evangelistic mission in “intercessory ecclesial” terms as a guide to the development of new ecclesial communities, institutional expressions of Methodist connectional structuring, and extra-ecclesial partnerships for the sake of service and witness in the world.

## **DEDICATION**

To Shannon, Emma, and Ethan

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## INTRODUCTION

*Next to evangelism, the most urgent task within the Christian Church—even more urgent than the much more publicized effort for ecumenicity—is the re-articulation of the Christian social ethic, of the relationship of the Christian and the church to the social order. Indeed one might well ask whether that is not essentially the evangelistic task of the day, the proclamation of a Gospel which reunites in the true New Testament sense, faith and works... Such an approach of course presupposes a readiness to undergo the pre-Constantinian church-world tension and conflict.<sup>1</sup>*

### **The Problem of Evangelism and Mission**

Imagine with me the scene of a young pastor trying to explain to the elder saint in the Church that with some comfy chairs, edgy art, and an espresso machine, the Church narthex could easily be made into a café. This is a good idea, she goes on, because this is where hipsters between the ages of 18 and 35 spend their time. Don't we want more young people in our Church? Shouldn't we make the investment to change the Church in order to be relevant? But the elder saint has made the coffee each Sunday since the time of Augustine, and as one might imagine, she looks at the pastor as if she were insane.

While this may be a bit of a caricature, it sets the scene for the challenge I want to address in this dissertation. In shifting times, in a complex, pluralistic society, and in the face of continuing membership loss, the Church seemingly faces the difficult decision between recovering its “relevance” or accepting its “irrelevance.” Yet, the way in which we frame questions about this challenge constrains what we take mission and evangelism to be about.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Peachey, “Toward an Understanding of the Decline of the West,” in *The Roots of Concern: Writings on Anabaptist Renewal 1952-1957*, ed. Virgil Vogt (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 27.

On the one hand, there is a renewed interest in and concern for the Church's practice of evangelism, understood primarily as the "invitation" offered through the proclamation of the gospel message to those outside the Church, that they might find salvation and a new life, and that the congregation or even the denomination might grow. Here, the focus of evangelism is on contextualizing the Church's life as the means to facilitate the effective translation and communication of the Christian gospel to new places and among new cultures. The choice appears to be between "Stained Glass" and "Starbucks," tradition or innovation, holding to the old ways of the Church or adapting to the needs and interests of the world. In the end, this choice is construed as one between successful and unsuccessful evangelism.

On the other hand, when looking beyond the decline of the modern mainline, mainly-white, Protestant Church, one sees a world in crisis: war, ecological devastation, poverty, disease, and hunger. Various forms of social suffering make for a harrowing picture of contemporary global realities. To glimpse the world in this way presses the Church beyond concern for its own survival, and raises larger questions about the Church's mission, referring here not only to the history of modern "missions," or to the limitation of mission to the Church's social service in the world, but mission understood more broadly, more theologically, as the Church's calling to participate in God's mission, the *missio Dei*, and to participate in God's ongoing redemptive work in all the creation. In the light of this calling, perhaps we should stop worrying about our identity and our relevance and simply engage in the necessary work of mission. We should focus on developing the dialogue and partnerships among Christian communities and with non-

Christian communities that will strengthen our outreach and service in the world. In different shape, the choice here is again one of relevance or irrelevance, focus on the Church, or focus on the world, and a choice between prophetic action and shrinking quietism.

### **Church, World, and Evangelistic Mission**

In this dissertation, I suggest that such choices are not our only options.

Evangelism and mission cannot simply be “let’s make the Church bigger” on the one hand, and “let’s meet the pressing, material needs of the world around us,” on the other. The former has the unfortunate effect of reducing evangelism to a kind of sales pitch, and the latter tends to dispense with evangelism in the interest of engaging in social action. It is a mistake to believe that evangelism is solely concerned with membership growth in the Church, but it is also a mistake to believe that evangelism competes with social action for our attention. Thus, in a world that presses concern for effective mission, and within a Church that hopes for inspired evangelism and renewed growth, and where both face very modern questions concerning success, relevance, and the meaning of influence, we must seek a way forward for the work of mission and evangelism that subverts the options we assume are the only ones before us.

However, I will not argue for a renewed focus on a particular form of evangelistic action that might, for example ground evangelistic mission in modes of faithful Christian “presence” in the world or, alternatively, in a reenergized commitment to a louder and more articulate proclamation of the gospel. The concerns raised above run deeply

enough in the history and practice of the modern, Western Christian community that an adjustment in method will not guide us in helpful ways. Widening the aperture, I argue that we must frame these issues theologically, both to name the effects of an emaciated theological discourse on the practice of evangelistic mission and to discover the words and vision to see a way to go on faithfully.

More specifically, I will suggest that a theology of evangelistic mission requires a larger ecclesiological vision that sees the Church not as the environment for or instrument of evangelistic mission, but rather as a particular “People” in, but not of, the world. In other words, I argue that evangelistic mission requires a location within an account of ecclesiology that is framed within the theological distinction of Church and world. So framed, the agency of the Church’s witness within a Church-world distinction can be articulated in terms that seek a path between ecclesial accommodation for the sake of cultural relevance in the world (understatement) and ecclesial self-absorption that offers witness primarily grounded in an aesthetic display to the world (overstatement). Thus, against those who continue to argue for evangelism only as a practice of verbal proclamation, as a means for “Church growth,” or as a renewal located in the realm of the *spiritual*, this project asserts the necessity of the Church as a visible, practicing, and witnessing People. Such a People, I will argue, appear as Christians engage both the practices of intra-ecclesial formation and extra-ecclesial engagement with the “other half of the reconciling event” in the world, while at the same time *leaning both ways at once*. This paradoxical stance is captured, I conclude, by framing evangelistic mission not as many do, in terms of the incarnation, but rather, as a practice of intercession.



Intercession names the place where the People of the Church stand, between formation and mission, between tradition and innovation, between God and the world, leaning both ways at once.

**“Counterweighting” Church and World:  
Seeking a “Balance Which Leans Both Ways At Once”**

I draw this image from an unlikely set of sources, turning first to Seamus Heaney in his collection of essays, *The Redress of Poetry*. There, Heaney suggests that poetry can fulfill what he calls a “counterweighting”<sup>2</sup> function, offering a “glimpsed alternative” of life that is often “denied or constantly threatened by circumstances.”<sup>3</sup> Poetry, in this light, offers the possibility of forming a “consciousness [that] can be alive to two different and contradictory dimensions of reality and still find a way of negotiating between them.”<sup>4</sup> He draws these images from the work of Simone Weil in her book, *Gravity and Grace*, where Heaney finds Weil’s work to be “informed by the idea of counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress—tilting the scales of reality toward some transcendent equilibrium.”<sup>5</sup> It is in this counterweighting, this “tilting” that Weil seeks to inhabit the tensioned space between gravity and grace, between the “contradictories” of this world.

However, for Weil, life between the “contradictories” does not seek to deflate the tension endemic to that space; as she writes, “The union of contradictories involves a

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<sup>2</sup> L. Gregory Jones, “The Practice of Christian Governance,” *Journal of Religious Leadership*, 1, no. 1 (2002): 117.

<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 3, 4. I discovered this resource in L. Gregory Jones, “The Practice of Christian Governance,” 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1952).

wrenching apart. It is impossible without extreme suffering. The correlation of contradictories is detachment...”<sup>6</sup> Instead, Weil poignantly suggests that this tilting requires a “simultaneous existence of incompatible things in the soul’s bearing; [a] balance which leans both ways at once.” That, Weil says, “is saintliness.”<sup>7</sup>

For this project, what Weil suggests is that we do not try to “solve” what we have come to think of as fixed and opposing “contradictories,” relevance and irrelevance, tradition and mission, Church and world. Rather, in *Gravity and Grace*, she invites us to inhabit the tense space between supposed polarities, without giving into the need to eliminate or even alleviate the anxiety and paradox endemic to that location “in between.” Weil invites us to dwell in that intersection, and with that invitation, offers an image to shape ecclesial identity and evangelistic mission; between these polarities, we seek a “balance which leans both ways at once,” into the Church and into the world.

### **The People Called Methodist, Leaning Both Ways at Once**

The concern for the theological relationship between ecclesiology and evangelistic mission and the need for an account that “leans both ways at once” is especially needed in the Methodist tradition. This is the case due to a longstanding lack of explicit theological reflection on the identity and agency of Methodism as a Church in the world. While evangelistic mission has figured centrally in constructing the identity and agency of the Methodist movement, explicit reflection on the relationship of the movement to the Church has not. Of the many issues this lack of self-reflection reveals, I

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<sup>6</sup> Weil,,92.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., emphasis added.

wish to focus upon one, namely, the confusion of the relationship of the Church to the world.

In his study of historical accounts of American Methodism, Mark Teasdale notes that the relationship between the Methodist movement and American culture is construed by historians in various terms, some suggesting growth and triumph, others finding a depressing declension.<sup>8</sup> For some, particularly historians in the late nineteenth century, the “close relationship” between Methodism and American culture “offered a trajectory for denominational growth.”<sup>9</sup> In this frame, success in evangelistic mission was tied directly to the Church’s proximity and openness to the broader culture, or world. More recent historical appraisals are not as positive. Whereas Methodism in its early forms within the American context might have approximated a particular “People called Methodist,” this stance proved unsustainable over time, given the Church’s slide into the world. Considering the work of John Wigger, Teasdale writes,

Wigger concluded that Methodism was supposed to be able to hold two ideas in tension: that it was set apart from the world to reform the nation, and that it was a popular religion of the people. In the end it could not do this, needing to curtsy to popular beliefs and sensibilities if it was to continue to grow successfully. As such, it allowed the new respectability of middle-class America to define it.<sup>10</sup>

Teasdale argues that other contemporary historians of American Methodism reach similar conclusions. He reports on David Hempton’s evaluation that Methodism “lived in a

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<sup>8</sup> Mark R. Teasdale, “Growth or Declension [electronic resource]: Methodist Historians’ Treatment of the Relationship Between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Culture of the United States,” *Theological Librarianship* 3, no. 2 (2010): 34, <https://journal.atla.com/ojs/index.php/theolib/article/view/163/452>. Also see Teasdale’s dissertation, *Pure American Evangelism: The Understanding and Practice of Evangelism in the Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1865-1920*. (PhD diss., Southern Methodist University, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> John Wigger, *Taking Heaven By Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 192-195, quoted by Teasdale, 42.

series of dialectics which allowed it simultaneously to draw nourishment from its host cultures while also remaining independent from them through its moral dictates and focus on holiness.”<sup>11</sup> Russell Richey, Teasdale suggests, reflects similar conclusions.<sup>12</sup>

Given these differing interpretations of history, and the theological commentary they offer on the proper relationship of the Church and the world, we are left with the question asked but perhaps not completely answered: when it comes to the relationship of the Church and the world for Methodists in the United States, what should it be? How should it look? How shall it be navigated? More specifically, in reference to an account of evangelistic mission that is thoroughly Methodist, how should we think about this relationship?

These are complicated questions, inasmuch as the historical appraisals lead us to conclude that there are only two possible answers: adhesion or renunciation. Either Methodism drinks deeply at the well of the world, borrowing from culture, adapting to culture for the sake of evangelistic success, or it rejects the same for the sake of ensuring faithful presence. The historical record seems to suggest that Methodism moved from the latter to the former. Again, Teasdale quotes Hempton, who wrote, “Methodism at its heart and center had always been a profoundly countercultural movement. It drew energy and personal commitment from the dialectics arising from its challenge to accepted

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<sup>11</sup> Teasdale is addressing David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005). See Teasdale, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Teasdale argues that Richey’s work “nuanced the question of whether the denomination or the nation was most impacted by the other. As he explained it, the influence primarily flowed from American Methodists to the culture of the United States during the 1800s-1820s. However, by the 1830s, the various cultural values arising in the sections of the United States began to take predominance in influencing the Methodists. Richey’s writing suggests that this shift is a story of declension for the Methodists as the fall from their once prominent and sanctified position.” See Teasdale, 41.

norms in religion and society.” In other words, it was once “in, but not of the world.” Hempton concludes, “[Methodism] thrived on opposition, but it could not long survive equipoise.”<sup>13</sup>

Without questioning Hempton’s historical interpretation, I would like to transpose the issue into a theological question. Can we envision Methodist evangelistic mission as a “leaning in both ways at once” between Church and world? While “equipoise” has been elusive for the Methodist movement in America, I will argue for its necessity in shaping Methodist ecclesial identity and evangelistic mission. Put differently, I will offer an argument for conceiving Methodist ecclesial identity in terms of a visible, practicing, witnessing “People,” but without ceding the necessity for an account of such a “People” engaging the world. Indeed, I will suggest that such a “People called Methodist” appear at the intersection of the Church and the world to practice evangelistic mission via the work of intercession. Further, I will show how concern for the theological differentiation of Church and world, for intra-ecclesial formation and extra-ecclesial engagement, is not foreign to the Wesleyan or Methodist theological tradition. In short, I will argue that it is thoroughly Methodist to envision the Church as a People called Methodist, engaged in evangelistic mission via the practices of intercession in the world.

As such, this work will also constitute a distinct voice in the more particular conversation over what constitutes evangelism in the Methodist tradition. While several Methodist authors have located the theological center of evangelistic practice in traditional Wesleyan themes (focus on primary concern for soteriology; God’s love expressed in prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace; seeking the development of

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<sup>13</sup> Hempton, 201, quoted by Teasdale, 43.

holiness of heart and life; and primarily embodied in verbal proclamation), this work will locate the key to evangelistic practice in this underdeveloped part of Methodist theological reflection: ecclesiology and the particular Wesleyan commitment to a relationship between formation and mission. The Methodist tradition, particularly in its United Methodist expression, provides the context as well as the audience for this study, offering sources for exemplification and targets for critique. However, a focus on an evangelistic, missional ecclesiology will contribute to the ongoing, developing conversation in the United Methodist tradition over what constitutes the identity and agency informing the evangelistic mission of the Church.

### **Structure of the Argument**

The dissertation begins in Chapter 1 with a review of several contemporary voices in Methodist theology of evangelism. A guiding thread through this review will be the presence (or lack thereof) of the theological relationship of the Church and the world, which in turn will reveal those who “understate” (Hunter, e.g.) and those who “overstate” (Stone, e.g.) that relationship, indicative of an inadequate understanding of the agency of the Church in witness and the agency of the world in formation. This chapter sets up the questions that guide the following two chapters, and that provide the foundation necessary to the development of a missional/evangelistic ecclesiology in Chapters 4 and 5.

In Chapter 2, I ask, “What is the agency of the world?” as a means to engage the lack of theological reflection on the formative influence of the principalities and powers

in contemporary (understated) theologies of evangelism. This should come as some surprise, inasmuch as I will also show Wesley's strong warning to Methodists to navigate their relationship with the world with care. Given the agency of the powers mediated through the example of the modern market-state, I will argue for the crucial role of intra-ecclesial formation within contemporary Methodist theology of evangelistic mission.

Anticipating the challenge that such a turn to formation tends to favor an overstated differentiation of Church and world, I will turn in Chapter 3 to an engagement with John Howard Yoder and the Methodist tradition in order to answer the question: "What is the agency of the Church?" After considering the Methodist necessity of an account of the Church that engages the world fueled by a wholistic soteriology, I turn to consider the work of the theologian, John Howard Yoder. Resisting a reading of Yoder that locates the Church's agency for evangelistic mission in a form of "aesthetic witness" offered to a "watching world," I seek to show how a deeper reading of Yoder reveals ecclesial identity grounded in a particular "Peoplehood," and that such a People are sent to the world not to apologetically translate the gospel, but rather, to discern the "tactical alliances" between Church and world that reveal the truth of God's reconciliation with the world through Christ. In short, this chapter argues for a more robust statement of the Church's agency in witness, without violating the theological distinction of Church and world.

In the final two chapters, I seek to develop an account of Methodist ecclesial identity that "leans both ways" between being a "People called Methodist" formed by the practices of Wesley's *General Rules* (Chapter 4) and, at the same time, shaped via the

evangelistic mission of intercession in the world (Chapter 5). What this allows, I argue, is ecclesial-evangelistic imagination that refuses to deflate the tensions between tradition and innovation or formation and mission—a vision of a holy People in evangelistic mission always at the intersection of Church and World, “leaning both ways at once.”

### **The Hope for this Work**

In his foreword to the re-release of Julian Hartt’s book, *Toward a Theology of Evangelism*, Stanley Hauerwas suggests that in modernity, to find a book about evangelism written by a theologian might come as a surprise. This is the case, he says because

...for some time those concerned about evangelism, as well as those writing about it, have not been theologians. They have been sociologists or people that specialize in marketing... [and] if the church is to recover a proper sense of evangelism, that is, an understanding of evangelism that is not equated with church growth then a book about evangelism written by a theologian will be a crucial resource.<sup>14</sup>

This study exists as a contribution to the conversation about the ecclesial identity and the practice of evangelistic mission in the Methodist tradition, and particularly, the United Methodist Church. I offer it as an engagement in these conversations with an unmistakable concern for the development of a robustly theological voice in the determination of evangelistic mission (as opposed to one dominated solely by interest in practice or technique). To that end, I hope that it joins many others emerging in this field, to serve together as “crucial resources” in this important conversation. How can we continue to speak into the intricate work of discerning the particular needs, the possible

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<sup>14</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “Foreword” to Julian Hartt, *Toward a Theology of Evangelism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), unnumbered page.



adhesions, necessary renunciations, and potential alliances in the textured space where pastors and congregations, where leaders and institutions, where Christians live—namely, at the intersection of Church and world? Our work in answering this question begins now.

## CHAPTER 1

*Evangelism is a practice that is performed at boundaries and along the edges of difference. Because of that, nothing could be more important to a theology of evangelism than clarifying the nature of that difference and...the Christian community's posture toward the world along those boundaries...<sup>1</sup>*

*Mission is certainly not just the exercise of a kind of hyperactive communications strategy. But neither is it simply sitting, and hoping somebody might notice.<sup>2</sup>*

### 1.1 Introduction

It might be assumed that a study of evangelism should begin not with theology but rather, with issues of practice. Statistical data might be presented to show the relationship between evangelistic method and measurable results, most specifically in the form of congregational membership growth. Thus, we could ask, “How does evangelism constitute a practice that most effectively achieves such growth?” Alternatively, we might look to address the modern division over the authentic shape of evangelistic witness: is it “proclamation” or “presence”? While such questions are important, they do not constitute the beginning of this conversation.

Instead, we begin with a theological question and the role it plays within the contemporary field of those who write in the theology and practice of evangelism.

Rather than simply outlining various positions, my concern will be to investigate the

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 172.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, “God’s Mission and Ours in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *The Archbishop of Canterbury* (2009) <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/779/gods-mission-and-ours-in-the-21st-century>, accessed March 28, 2012.

means by which the theological relationship, and more specifically—the theological distinction—between the Church and the world are employed by scholars within this field. What we will see is that contemporary theology of evangelism is often lacking in any explicit focus upon such a relationship. I will argue that this lack is, indeed, problematic. However, this gap does not exist for all authors in the field, and we shall see how the Church-world distinction functions in ways that are also problematic for the development of a theology of evangelism.

What will also be clear from this introductory review is that I focus particularly on Wesleyan or Methodist voices within the conversation. While this focus may be construed as an artificial limitation, my intent in pursuing this narrower conversation is important. I will argue that the concern for the relationship between Church and world is not simply theological critique imported from a tradition outside of (and foreign to) the Methodist movement. While the Church-world distinction and relationship is a theological commitment most recognizable within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, it is a commitment rightly understood as a Christian commitment, crucial to the identity and practice of the Church catholic. Yet, even more specifically, I will argue that for Wesley and his followers, the concern for the relationship between the Church and the world (and, at times, a lack of concern for that relationship) plays significant roles in constituting Methodist identity and mission, and that in order to develop a faithful theology of evangelism, attention to the agencies of both Church and world will be necessary.

Yet, before we can move into this review, we must first address the question of why the frame of the relationship of “Church and world” should be employed. What is it about that particular theological issue that becomes so important for a conversation in the theology of evangelism? An effort, albeit brief, to address this question will constitute the first section of this chapter. Following the development of this theme, we will turn to several voices in the theology of evangelism in order to develop a map of the current state of the conversation and, more specific to the argument in this project, to draw out the presence (or lack thereof) of the Church-world relationship in the work.

However, the mere presence or lack of attention paid to the Church-world distinction only names part of the problem that this dissertation will address. The issue, I argue, is not just that some authors in the theology of evangelism tend to ignore the distinction of Church and world, or that other authors tend to pick it up and reassert its crucial significance. More particularly, my concern is the way in which this deployment affects the inevitable question that lies at the heart of a developing theology of evangelism: how does the Church engage the world? What is at stake in that engagement? I will argue in later chapters that a theology of evangelism, indeed an account of the theological identity and social ethics of the Church, will require an account of the Church as the People of God “leaning both ways” between God and the world of principalities and powers, fulfilling a call to embody evangelism as a form of intercession in the world. To envision the Church’s place “in but not of” the world, embodying this evangelistic presence, we will have to consider both the identity and agency of the world,

and of the Church sent to intercede in it. As a first step on this journey, we turn to consider the theological relationship of the Church and the world.

## **1.2 Why Focus on the Distinction of Church and World?**

In conversations around the theology and practice of ecclesial renewal, congregational development, and the “missional church,” concepts of “mission” and “evangelism” (as well as the relationship between them) continue to inhabit troubled space. In the division of modernists and fundamentalists in the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, mission and evangelism were severed from one another, the former eventually describing the Church’s engagement with the world in forms of social action to meet pressing material needs; the latter remaining focused on the domain of the private, inward, spiritual life of the individual.<sup>3</sup>

Such divisions have played significant roles in the twentieth-century ecumenical conversation concerning the relationship between the evangelistic proclamation of the gospel and the Church’s participation in ministries of social justice in the world. As Norman Thomas notes, following the insights of David Bosch, “The focus of the church’s mission during the first three decades of [the twentieth] century was on *evangelism*.”<sup>4</sup> From that time forward, Thomas argues, stretching from the ecumenical gathering at Tambaram in 1938 to the meeting of the World Council of Churches at New Dehli in 1961, “the *church* was the primary focus,” presumably as the final destination

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<sup>3</sup> See Jean Miller Schmidt, *Souls or the Social Order: The Two-Party System in American Protestantism*. Chicago studies in the history of American religion, v. 18. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Norman E. Thomas, “Ecumenical Directions in Evangelism: Melbourne to San Antonio,” *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education*, 5 (1989-1990), 52.

toward which evangelistic efforts all aimed.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this was part of the reason for the founding of the WCC in 1948, namely, “to support the churches in their worldwide missionary and evangelistic tasks.”<sup>6</sup> But Thomas notes that the ground had moved by 1961, with the gathering in New Delhi, where a discernible shift of emphasis was placed on the world “as the primary focus for God’s concern.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, as John Howard Yoder argued, the division between evangelism and social witness has roots more deeply planted in the history of the Reformation, as some place hope for renewal in a transformed spiritual life, others in the broader development of a holy society, and both based on differing accounts of where the center of “historical meaning” is located.<sup>8</sup>

For those in the Methodist tradition(s) in America, reading of John Wesley has certainly been influenced by these divisions; different camps have sought to portray Wesley as a staunch advocate of their particular kind of renewal. This was possible because these divisions influenced Wesley himself! These divisions continue to inform the ecclesial imagination of the United Methodist Church, which generally operates with the structural distinction between evangelism and congregational development on the one hand, and social justice and mission on the other. Arguments continue over which represents the greater faithfulness and the more significant hope for the renewal (and growth) of the Church.

But Yoder introduces an interesting problem at just this point. He argues that because differing traditions of renewal locate historical meaning in different places, they

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> John Howard Yoder, “A People In the World,” *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 65-101.

cannot, finally, find peace with one another, resulting in an endless “oscillation” in the Church between spiritual renewal and social renewal. What is necessary, Yoder argues, is the grounding of both forms of renewal in a more primary location for historical meaning, namely, in the “People of God.” Bryan Stone has recently drawn on these insights to argue that “Christian evangelism requires as a condition of its very possibility the presence in the world, though distinct from the world, of a visible people, a new society, into which persons may be invited and formed.”<sup>9</sup> However, because the Church has lost much of this sense of its own identity and mission in the world, Stone rightly suggests that this “neglect of Peoplehood may well be the central challenge facing Christian evangelism.”<sup>10</sup>

The possibility for such a Peoplehood is premised on a theological understanding of the differentiation of Church and world. For Yoder, and thus, for Stone, that which is world is still God’s creation, but a part of creation that is distinguished from the Church not in orders of being, but rather by virtue of its resistance to the confession that Jesus is Lord. In Yoder’s words, “Church and world are not two compartments under separate legislation or two institutions with contradictory assignments, but two levels of pertinence of the same Lordship.”<sup>11</sup> Of significant importance here is not just the fact of the Church-world distinction, but to be more precise, the nature of that differentiation—rooted not in ontology or geography, but rather, in agency. This is to say that while Church and world are both historically located, embedded in time and space, they are to

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<sup>9</sup> Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 194-5

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), ix.

be differentiated by the trajectories they travel or the aims they seek. Again, to echo Yoder, the difference is that the Church acknowledges in its life and, thus, in its way of life—its agency—the Lordship of Jesus. The world does not.<sup>12</sup>

More precise reflection on the meaning and content of the differentiated agencies of world and Church will have to wait for the following two chapters. Both must be considered along the way to the construction of a missional ecclesiology that emphasizes the evangelistic Peoplehood of the Church “in but not of” the world. For now, the question that we must answer is this: why is this consideration of the Church-world difference so crucial for an account of missional evangelism? I argue that there are three reasons.

First, without an account of the differentiation of Church and world, we lose the capacity to speak theologically about the mission of the Church, and thus, of the practice of evangelism. For Yoder, this differentiation sets the terms of what constitutes the Church’s mission in the world. He writes, “The people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the mission of the people of God is dependent on an account of the distinction of the Church and the world, inasmuch as it is in the Church that the world rediscovers its vocation. Without the differentiation, there can be no meaningful account of evangelistic mission. Interestingly, Rowan Williams acknowledges a similar commitment: “...if we are to keep on learning about Christ, then at the very least the Church needs practices, conventions and life-patterns that keep alive the distinctiveness of the Body...To use the heavily loaded language common in these

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<sup>12</sup> Elaboration on Yoder’s development of the Church-world distinction will appear in Chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> Yoder, *Body Politics*, ix.



discussions; a church which does not at least possess certain features of a ‘sect’ cannot act as an agent of transformation.”<sup>14</sup>

Of course, care must be exercised in articulating the nature of this distinction, particularly as I will argue in later chapters, to avoid the potential under- and overstatement of the Church-world relationship. David Bosch reflects on this dynamic at the beginning of his landmark study, *Transforming Mission*. He writes, “...neither a secularized church...nor a separatist church...can faithfully articulate the *missio Dei*.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, he proposes that for meaningful mission, the Church can only exist “living in” what he calls, “the *creative tension* of, at the same time, being called out of the world and sent into the world...”<sup>16</sup> Such a distinction, properly understood, does not undermine a robust account of ecclesial mission; instead, in fact, it makes such an account possible.

Beyond underwriting the mere possibility of a theological account of evangelistic mission, secondly, the distinction of Church and world also resists the potential distortion of such an account. In other words, the differentiation of Church and world allows both Church and world to be who they are. Without consideration of their differing agencies, understandings of both Church and world are subject to distortion, which inevitably has a negative impact on faithful practice. For instance, without adequate reflection on the Church’s agency, the Church’s identity can be reductively described in instrumental terms. In other words, instead of reflecting on the nature of the Church as a particular People with a particular identity, set of practices, and a mission to serve, the Church is

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<sup>14</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 233.

<sup>15</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts In Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, italics added.

rendered as a storehouse, or a repository of practices, open to being shaped at will for the sake of evangelistic mission. Without care for the distinction of Church and world, we lose sight of what we mean when we speak of the Church, and the ways in which only the Church can be called to pursue these practices we name as evangelism.

At the same time, however, without this reflection on agency, we risk overstating the Church's responsibility for evangelistic witness, to the end that the Church fails to take seriously its own tendency to sin. The close relationship between evangelistic mission and some of the Church's most problematic practices in history (colonial domination, violent crusades, endorsing slavery) must always give us pause. A lack of reflection on the Church's agency impedes the crucial memory necessary to identify evangelism as the work of the triune God in and through the Church. Thus, reflection on the Church's agency is not only reflection on what the Church "does," but also what it is called to do to remember that it is not God. In other words, this is a calling to the crucial exercise of ecclesial agency through the practices of confession and repentance.

Such reflection on ecclesial agency creates the conditions necessary for the theological naming of the world, and particularly the ways in which God has given the world a certain agency. As we will see in Chapter 2 the world as conceived in Biblical witness is most certainly part of God's creation, and is called "good." These "principalities and powers" in their original created state are established by God for a certain purpose, in service to the God who created them. Yet, as we will see, in their fallenness, these powers and principalities have turned from God's aim to serve their own disobedient purposes. So rendered, the world is not a neutral agent in the historical

context of mission and evangelism. Instead, the world has a particular agency, aimed not at serving the will of God, or reflecting the ways of Jesus, but rather, directed to its own ends, which (again, as we will see more clearly in Chapter 2) are defined as survival, self-aggrandizement, and inevitably, death itself. However, if the world is not allowed to be “the world” understood in these terms, what does the Church risk when witnessing to the fallen world? What effect might this have on the witness of the Church? Indeed, without this reflection on agency, the world in theologies of evangelism is often rendered in neutral terms, as “culture” or “context” from which the Church is able to borrow at will for the sake of the contextualization and the apologetic communication of the gospel. In the unreflective, atheological reading of the world, the Church too easily leans so far into the world as to fall in.

This points to the third reason this consideration of the differing identities and agencies of Church and world is so crucial, because it relates to the issue of practice in the Church. The distinction of Church and world creates the conditions necessary for faithful practice. As one can imagine, embodied life amid Church and world constitutes a complicated existence in time. Engagement in the life of the local Church confirms this, as it is a community constantly living in the tensions between identity and intelligibility, between internal formation and external mission, and between conserving tradition and embracing innovation. I argue that to ignore these questions of agency leads to a privileging of one pole of these tensions over the other, resulting in reflections on practice that tend to deflate the tensions and consequently, give up on the task of theologically informing faithful practice.

For example, given what I have said above regarding the agency of the Church and the world, one can see a concomitant tendency among those who write in evangelism to emphasize external mission over internal formation. If the world is simply a “context” or a “mission field” which the Church is called to “reach” (and if “to reach” is construed in terms disciplined by theorists and practitioners seeking the numerical growth of the congregation), and if there is no risk of losing the particularity of Christian witness due to neglect of the differentiation in agencies between Church and world, then we can see how the weight is distributed unevenly between mission and formation. Yet, evangelistic mission in the world and ecclesial formation must remain in tension with one another, as the relationship of evangelistic mission and formation is a key issue derivative of the larger concern for the relationship of the Church and the world. An account of formation without evangelistic mission is a move toward sectarianism, and an account of evangelistic mission without formation is a move toward unquestioning translation. Concern for both is concern for maintaining the balance between supporting the Church’s traditioned identity and the Church’s missional intelligibility. Consideration of the agencies of Church and world is crucial to such practical theological reflection.

But to pick up another question that must be answered before moving forward: while the Church-world distinction is crucial for Christians in general, why is this consideration important for Methodists in particular? To recapitulate the questions raised in the introduction, one might wonder if a concern for the Church-world relationship is foreign to the Methodist tradition. And if foreign, then is not the concern for the Church-world relationship a critique to be regarded as “from outside” of the movement, and thus,

worthy of dismissal on those terms? Before moving forward, then, we must take a moment to consider the question, “Why is the concern for the relationship of Church and world crucial for Methodists?”

### **1.3 Why is Concern for Church-World Crucial for Methodists?**

It may seem that the concern for the Church-world distinction is beyond the reach of the traditionally Wesleyan or Methodist theological traditions. Indeed, it is the case that the most developed theological insistence for a Church-world distinction comes from the Anabaptist and Mennonite traditions.<sup>17</sup> Still, for Wesley and his followers, the concern for the relationship of the Church and the world (and, at times, a lack of concern for that relationship) plays a significant role in constituting Methodist identity and evangelistic mission. William Abraham relays the challenge made by Thomas Coke and Henry Moore “to the preachers of the Gospel, late in connection with John Wesley”:

The God of this world has hitherto triumphed over every revival of true religion. Yet the gates of hell have never wholly prevailed. The Lord has raised up another holy temple out of the once scattered living stones of the once beautiful building. And this he will do again, if those who now serve him “leave their first love.” On you it chiefly rests, whether the present revival will continue, and keep its rank in that universal spread of righteousness, which we expect from the sure word of prophecy, when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, for a denomination that claims as its mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” a concern for the ways in which this community of

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<sup>17</sup> The roots of this concept in the work of John Howard Yoder will be detailed in Chapter Three.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Coke and Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley*. (London, UK: G. Paramore, 1792), iv-v. Quoted in William Abraham, “At Full Liberty in the Flight from the Wrath to Come: A Practical Platform for United Methodists,” unpublished paper, delivered to the Order of Elders in the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church, 13 September 2010.

discipleship engages this world seems crucial. Here, we seek to show that a concern for the agencies of Church and world is vital to the development of a faithful theology of evangelism, particularly for Methodists. We begin by addressing the ways that Methodism itself, as a theological tradition committed to faithful practice, leans both ways at once, into its identity as a part of the Church and into its mission to serve in the world.

In his consideration of the development of Wesleyan/Methodist theology in *Practical Divinity*, Thomas Langford suggests the image of a stream as a way to envision the ongoing development of a tradition over time. Like a stream, Langford argues, Methodist theology has a point of origin and a dominant current, but, also like a stream, it does not have “neat boundaries.”<sup>19</sup> Over time, the stream encounters different types of terrain, affecting the “coloration” and the flow of the stream, sometimes causing “expansion” or “contraction.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, Langford argues, there are qualities to the water in this stream that continue to show their connection to the original source. Hence, he locates Methodist theology as unmistakably part of the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church, naming Wesley’s deep concern for and, often, drawing from several streams of the Christian tradition. While noting Wesley’s clear location in post-Reformation England, and thus, within the sphere of influence of the theological traditions of the Church of England, ranging from Puritans to the Anglican Divines, Langford also notes the breadth of the streams that flowed into what became the Methodist tradition. From the commitment to *sola fide* in German Pietism, Eastern Orthodox sensibilities

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition, Volume One, Revised Ed.*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*,

concerning holiness, and Roman Catholic emphases on holy living, just to name a few, Wesley developed a theology that fed the practice of a missionary people called Methodists. As Langford notes, it is this complex stream that seeks “to express, in changing contexts, [Wesley’s] concern for practical divinity.”<sup>21</sup>

In his desire to draw together seeming theological polarities to underwrite faithful practice, or “practical divinity,” Wesley (in Langford’s terms) modeled a theological task in both “apologetic” and “confessional” modes. At this intersection, Langford argues, the developing means of preaching the gospel in the world were held in relationship to questions of understanding the gospel’s content within the Church: “Wesley stood astride the border of listening and speaking and kept the issues of what and how to teach bound together.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, key to the focus of this study, we might say that Wesley modeled a way to strike a balance that “leans both ways at once,” leaning always at once into both Church (including creedal, doctrinal, and theological tradition and practice) and into the world (calling forth a contextualized response to particular needs and concerns in a specific place and time—for Wesley, of course, that being eighteenth-century England).

Langford argues that Wesley’s heirs, however, have been less successful in striking such a balance, particularly in the American context, where, in the relationship between gospel and culture, “a pervasive concern has been to understand the mind of the time so as to meet it with the Christian message.”<sup>23</sup> The inability to live out this balance can also be seen more specifically in relationship to the development of Methodist

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Langford, “What Is the Character of Methodist Theology?”, in *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church*, eds. Russell Richey, William Lawrence, Dennis Campbell (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 45.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 46.

ecclesiology. In his 1962 address to the Oxford Institute, Albert Outler asked, “Do Methodists have a Doctrine of the Church?”<sup>24</sup> He argued that Methodism is best understood as an “ad interim” movement that functioned as an “evangelical order within a church catholic” to pursue a soteriological mission. As Wesley put it to his preachers, “You have one business: saving souls.” Thus, pursuing this mission, the Church is defined by Wesley as “act,” or as “mission” itself, “as the enterprise of saving and maturing souls in the Christian life.” Note here Outler’s concern for inclusion of maturation as part of salvation, naming the Methodist commitment to justification and sanctification. Outler argues that because of the centrality of this wholistic soteriology as the engine within ecclesiological mission, Wesley had cause to commit “ecclesiological irregularities” such as “field preaching, lay preaching, [an] extra-parochial, supra-diocesan pattern of supervision and control, [and] extemporary prayers in worship.”<sup>25</sup> As Methodism evolves to become its own Church in the American context, Outler argues that this practice continues in the form of a “symbiosis,” where the American Methodist movement freely borrows and adapts forms of organization and practice from the wider world seen as useful for its ecclesial life and effective in the expansion of evangelistic mission.<sup>26</sup> For Outler, this practice often amounted to American Methodism “borrowing and patching and playing with pious gimmicks” and risked the possibility that in its sustained effort to remain effective in its ecclesial mission through unreflective

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<sup>24</sup> Albert Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?,” reprinted in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville, TN: Epworth, 1964).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Outler writes, “Typically, when Methodists have felt a lack in matters ecclesiological, they have looked about for whatever seemed handy and truly useful—and then proceeded to adapt it to their own uses and purposes (often quite different from the original).” *Ibid.*, 20.



borrowing, Methodism imperiled its connection to the traditions and the practices of the Church catholic.<sup>27</sup> In its desire to remain relevant to the wider world, Methodism, particularly in America, has put at risk its identity as Church.

This ecclesiological confusion continues in modern Methodism, embodied in the increasing equation of the Church and the congregation, thus placing primary focus on the “local church.” While we will consider the historical development of this move in later chapters, the point to make here is that limited ecclesiology leads to limited imagination in determining what constitutes the theology and practice of evangelism. While the congregation is crucial to an account of ecclesial identity in Methodist tradition (seeing the Church as a particular “People called Methodist”), Russell Richey has rightly argued that Methodism is also both “smaller than” the congregation—in the class meeting, for example—as well as “larger than” the congregation—in the Conference and throughout the Connection.<sup>28</sup> To ignore these narrower and broader instantiations of the Methodist Church inevitably impacts reflection on the theology and practice of evangelism. And indeed, this is what we see in some contemporary Methodist theologies of evangelism that are primarily concerned with the congregation and particularly

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 26. As examples of this “borrowing,” Outler points to the adaptation of Episcopal polity, the “scheme of representation and delegation in the conference system,” the establishment of a Constitution, and “the patterns of frontier expansion and settlement.” Ibid., 20. He writes, “My point is that if we are to understand the anomalies of Methodist ecclesiology—or anything else doctrinal in Methodism—we must take this deep-seated symbiotic tendency into account.” Ibid., 22. Also note Randy Maddox’s diagnostic work in his article, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” where Maddox follows the effects in America of increasing individualization, and identifies that such a focus “eroded emphasis on the church.” In fact, he argues, “it became characteristic of nineteenth-century North American theology—across the Protestant spectrum—to focus on individual soteriology, virtually disregarding the church. If anything, American Methodism led the way in this development.” See Randy Maddox, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” in *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu*, ed. Tim Macquiban (Oxford, ST: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 131–60.

<sup>28</sup> Russell Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives*. (Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2009), 239.

concerned for its numerical growth. In short, ecclesiology affects evangelistic mission, and given the relative lack of Methodist ecclesiological reflection, Methodist evangelism suffers as a result. This gestures toward the need to develop Methodist ecclesiology that “leans both ways,” constituting the imaginative theological space to envision a Church in evangelistic mission in the world at all levels.

Reflection on ecclesiological identity and agency also affects the ways in which we imagine the Church’s engagement with the world. Navigating the relationship of the Church and the world continues to be an issue for reflection in the contemporary United Methodist Church and particularly, in recent years, in conversations concerning the development of a Methodist theology of evangelism. In discussing an agenda for further research in the theology of evangelism for Methodists, Paul Chilcote notes that “little has been written up to this point in Methodist circles concerning the seismic cultural shift from modern to postmodern culture in the western world and ramifications with regard to evangelism.”<sup>29</sup> Of course, some have addressed this, as Chilcote suggests: “Attention to western secular culture pervades the work of George Hunter. [And] Bryan Stone has provided his own critique of and response to contemporary cultural shifts.”<sup>30</sup> But as we will see through direct engagement with the work of Hunter and Stone, as well as with others in the tradition, more must be said. Chilcote concludes, “More Methodist voices...need to be added to the growing number of scholars concerned about this pressing issue.”<sup>31</sup> To the extent that this issue, the relationship between the Church and

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Chilcote, “Evangelism in the Methodist Tradition” *T & T Clark Companion to Methodism*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2010), 237.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

the culture and its impact on a theology of evangelism, remains underdeveloped for Methodists, this project seeks to add such a voice.

Far from a concern foreign to Methodist theological and practical traditions, the relationship of Church and world continues to be a difficult, if not problematic, issue. As we will see, first in an engagement with the agency of the world in chapter two, and then in an engagement with the agency of the Church in chapter three, Methodist theology of evangelism must consider the relationship of the Church and the world on the way toward an expression of Methodist ecclesial identity and evangelistic mission that leans both ways at once. As a first step, we turn to consider the ways in which these issues have played a role, or have not played a role, in contemporary conversations in Methodist theologies of evangelism.

## **1.4 Church and World within Contemporary Methodist Theology of Evangelism**

### **1.4.1 Setting the Scene: Albert Outler**

Albert Outler's work is crucial to theological developments in Methodist (and particularly United Methodist) theologies of evangelism in the late twentieth century. Deeply engaged in the ecumenical movement, Outler was well aware of the growing divisions over the question of whether evangelism or social justice constituted the center of the Church's mission. Anticipating the fruit of ongoing ecumenical reflection on that question, Outler spoke into that discussion within the newly formed United Methodist Church when, in 1971, he gave his Denman Lectures, published as *Evangelism in the*

*Wesleyan Spirit*.<sup>32</sup> Given his concern for Methodist ecclesiological identity and mission, articulated nearly a decade earlier in his address to the Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies in 1962, and his ongoing engagement with the ecumenical movement, it comes as no surprise that in his Denman Lectures, Outler argues for a reconnection of evangelism, mission, and Methodist ecclesial identity. This is significant, because while Outler does not explicitly address the theological differentiation of the Church and the world, he introduces the need for Methodist theology of evangelism to engage these crucial concerns, drawing together reflection on ecclesial identity and formative practices and on the shape of evangelistic mission in the world. Outler envisions a Methodist evangelism to be the witness of a sanctificationist, catholic community of “martyrs and saints.”<sup>33</sup>

Outler begins by pointing out that evangelism in the late twentieth century suffered under the stereotypes it inherited from early American revival experiences embodied in the First and Second Great Awakenings. From the first, fueled by the preaching of Jonathan Edwards (among others, including George Whitfield), Outler argues that evangelism came to focus on “a personal experience of deliverance from the wrath to come, and of God’s unmerited mercy.”<sup>34</sup> Despite the inclusion of a God of grace at the end of his description of this evangelistic practice, Outler makes his judgment clear: “It was an evangelism rooted largely in terror.”<sup>35</sup> So framed, evangelism in this era takes conversion to be its primary end, focused on the “decisive change of

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<sup>32</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, (Nashville, TN: Tidings, 1971).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-109.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

heart and mind and will,” a conversion “from despair to trust,” and all this within the life of the solitary individual.<sup>36</sup>

The problematic equation of evangelism with conversion tied to a growing commitment to individualism came to full bloom in the Second Great Awakening. This affected not only the shape of evangelistic practice, but also the theological framework that gave it meaning, inasmuch as Outler sarcastically puts it, evangelism eschews “the niceties of theological distinctions and church formalities.”<sup>37</sup> Instead, he argues, evangelism came to be associated with a very narrow set of theological concerns, such as an anthropomorphic vision of God, an Eutychian Christology, (emphasizing Christ’s human nature absorbed and dominated by his divine nature), substitutionary atonement lifted up as the only way to talk about Christ’s saving work, and consequently, a significant focus on Justification-as-salvation while neglecting sanctification’s role in salvation entirely. Here again, conversion was posited as the “end” of evangelistic outreach, and not as the beginning of a life of discipleship.

Yet, for Outler, this is not only where evangelism loses connection to a broader, and presumably more faithful, set of traditional theological commitments; it is also the place that evangelism ceases to be authentically Wesleyan. He argues that Wesley firmly held to the belief that “conversion is never more than the bare threshold of authentic and comprehensive evangelism.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, for Wesley, and in contrast to developments in American Methodist evangelistic practice, Outler suggests that “sanctification became the goal and end of all valid evangelistic endeavor,” which, he adds, beyond the immediacy

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 23.

of conversion, “implies a lifelong process.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, an authentically Wesleyan evangelism must move beyond the limited vision of the Great Awakenings, and “rediscover...that evangelism barely begins with conversion and a profession of faith,” but instead, “must always lead beyond to a lifelong mission of witness and service in the world for which Christ died.”<sup>40</sup> Reflection is required not only on the practices that may be associated with the nascent development of faith (evangelism), but also on the body that sustains the life and growth of discipleship on the way to perfection (ecclesiology).

This means that evangelism cannot ever be meaningfully separated from reflection on the community that embodies it. As Outler put it, “evangelism is never a private affair: it is the outreaching hand and heart of the *People* of God, drawing men [*sic*] into the fellowship of faith and grace.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, Wesleyan evangelism must always begin and end with “visible social effects;” the word made audible must become the word made visible.<sup>42</sup> This is not only the necessary sign for evangelistic fruit, but is also the condition for any ongoing practice of evangelism; if there is no “outer effect,” then there can be no witness to the world. Outler argues that the gathering of Societies and the practices of sacramental piety and community discipline were not simply the “next stage” movements in Christian formation after evangelism. Instead, these practices constituted the Methodists as a visible people— practicing, witnessing Christians who were

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 53, emphasis in original.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 101.

evangelistic by virtue of their witness offered to the world. Outler calls the Church to emulate this vision, in its calling to be a church of “martyrs and servants.”<sup>43</sup>

In this, we see that Outler’s work holds together concern for the relation of Church and world embodied in reflection on the relationship of ecclesiology and evangelism, considering the shape of the Church’s witness to the world. Given his engagement with the ecumenical movement, it comes as no surprise that Outler’s work in the Denman Lectures anticipated a decade of theological reflection on the relationship of mission and evangelism.<sup>44</sup> It also anticipates a theological turn in the late twentieth-century conversation about evangelism within the United Methodist Church. Outler’s ecumenical, traditioned theological perspective, along with his deep Wesleyan and Methodist roots, paved the way for further reflection on and articulation of Methodist theology and practice of evangelism. More specifically, it might also have led to more reflection within that conversation on the specific relationship of the Church and the world in subsequently developed Methodist theologies of evangelism. However, what we will find in a contemporary review of such theologies is that they did not continue down this path of reflection, at least not explicitly.

Instead, reflecting the ongoing need to overcome the Great Awakenings’ tendency to limit the end of evangelism to conversion, many (but not all) contemporary Methodist authors in the field construct a theology of evangelism that rightly seeks a balanced emphasis on the doctrines of justification and sanctification. Thus, as we will see, while some identify evangelism as a practice associated with both conversion and discipleship,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 84-109.

<sup>44</sup> Chilcote, 233.

and while this connection is both deeply Wesleyan and a helpful corrective, it tends to neglect other theological themes crucial to a theology of evangelism. Of concern here is the relative absence of Outler's focus on both ecclesiology and evangelism, and extrapolating, on the relationship of the Church and the world. The ironic result is that theological reflection on the practice of the Church's engagement with the world is often missing in theological consideration of both Church and world! In the effort to articulate evangelism in proclamation, conversion, formation, and discipleship, when the larger theological question of Church and world is neglected, problems will arise.

This is exactly what happens, I argue, in Methodist theology of evangelism. In short, the result of the habitual neglect of the Church-world relationship is a theology of evangelism that tends to understate or overstate the different agencies of Church and world, and thus, constitutes a theology of evangelism that fails to "lean both ways at once." We can see these tendencies at work in the theology of evangelism developed in recent works of Methodists in the field, and thus, we turn next to consider some examples. First, I engage with the work of George Hunter, who, I argue, tends to understate the Church-world distinction. Following this, we will take up the contrasting position of Bryan Stone, who helpfully resists the understatement of the Church-world relationship in Hunter, but who still leans too far the other way and overstates their difference. Each author helps us to see the need for a theology of evangelism that learns from both, and that moves beyond under- and overstatement, toward a position that leans both ways at once.



### **1.4.2 The (Likely) Understatement of the Church-World Differentiation: George Hunter**

One of the most significant voices in articulating a Methodist theology of evangelism is that of George G. Hunter III. Writing about Hunter, Paul Chilcote suggests that “few Methodists have published more in the area of evangelism... Nearly all of Hunter’s books touch on evangelism and Church growth in one way or another...”<sup>45</sup> Yet it is this latter clarification of Hunter’s work as concerned with “Church growth” that helps to understand his scholarly project. More specifically, Hunter’s writing reflects concern for the Church’s engagement with its unbelieving environment in the hope of motivating the congregation to a more authentic and successful evangelistic mission, resulting in the visible, measurable result of congregational growth. Much of this leads Hunter to suggestions for the Church’s adaptation of its message and practices in the hope of greater evangelistic impact. As Chilcote writes, “Several of his books...[including most of Hunter’s work in the past twenty years] stress the importance of attending to and adapting the lived gospel in dynamic ways to historical and cultural contexts.”<sup>46</sup> Much of this stress has drawn Hunter’s focus to issues of communication in evangelism, particularly the ways in which such communication might embolden the sharing of the Christian faith with a world less and less predisposed to or interested in such “good news.” As Hunter puts it, his project asks,

How do you communicate the Christian faith to the growing numbers of ‘secular’ people in the western world?... How do you communicate Christianity’s meaning to people who do not darken church doors, who have no church background, who possess no traditional Christian vocabulary, who do not know what we are talking about? The question presses us with greater intensity

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

as we realize that the countries and populations of the western world have become ‘mission fields’ once again... I have been obsessed with this question for over 25 years.<sup>47</sup>

It is that obsession that has led Hunter to his writing, speaking, and teaching on the subject.

However, the focal question in this study guides our investigation of Hunter’s work: what is the agency given to Church and world? How does Hunter understand the identity of each, and, if they are to be differentiated, what is the relationship of Church and world across that differentiation? As we have already seen, Hunter’s general project pushes the Church as he knows it (meaning for the most part, the “mainline” Protestant Church in North America) beyond its walls into active evangelistic ministry in the world. This focus reveals itself in the titles of many of his books, for example: *Church for the Unchurched*, *How to Reach Secular People*, and *Radical Outreach*.<sup>48</sup> Yet, I argue that Hunter neglects theological reflection on the relationship of Church and world, and in the process, constructs a theology and practice of evangelism guilty of *understating* their relationship. As we will see, Hunter understates the agency of the Church, reducing it to a functional entity, the system through which salvation is offered to the world, the means employed to achieve the end. That end is understood primarily, if not solely, as a salvation of individuals with emphasis placed on justification and conversion. And because this constitutes the purpose and mission of the Church, Hunter will argue that there should be no barrier between the Church and the world of unbelief that is the focus of the Church’s mission. This is where Hunter understates the agency of the world.

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<sup>47</sup> George G. Hunter, III. *How To Reach Secular People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>48</sup> George G. Hunter, III. *Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry and Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003).

Rather than seeing the “world” as a descriptive term encompassing the vast diversity of the disobedient principalities and the powers, Hunter, like others, reduces the world to “culture” or “context” or “mission field.” While descriptive, such terms tend to neglect the theological identity and the disobedient agency of the world. So rendered, the culture or context simply becomes a repository of content and practices available for the Church’s use in the search for relevance and, inevitably, congregational growth. Through such understatement, I argue that Hunter inadvertently proposes the collapse of the Church-world relationship.

In *Radical Outreach*, Hunter makes his purpose clear: “This book proposes the ‘apostolic renewal’ of tens of thousands of churches across North America and calls, as Wallace Fisher did a generation ago, traditional churches to move ‘from tradition to mission.’”<sup>49</sup> This differentiation, “from tradition to mission,” is deeply important to Hunter, as it represents the solution to what he believes to be the primary problem facing the contemporary Church: too wedded to its own interior life, too comfortable with the status quo, most Churches in North America are more committed to the way things are (tradition) than to change in order to reach people who are not already present in the Church (mission). To pursue this differentiation, Hunter creates the paradigmatic model of what he calls “Old East Side Church”, a composite sketch of every Church that reflects this “inward-rather-than-outward” focus. He says,

I am prodding Old East Side Church because people who do not know the grace, love, and reign of God, who have never experienced justification or second birth, who are not yet following Jesus Christ and seeking his will for their lives, are lost, like sheep without a shepherd; and they need to be found, which is supposed to be Old East Side’s main business. As William Temple once

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 18.

observed, ‘The true Church is the only society on earth that exists for its nonmembers.’<sup>50</sup>

This particular quote reveals much about Hunter’s implicit ecclesiology, inasmuch as we can see some of the broad themes suggested above present here. First, Hunter suggests that “finding the lost” is the “main business” of the Church, and he invokes William Temple to further the point that the Church should be focused not inwardly, but outwardly. I will hold on commenting on the relationship of Church and world at this point, only wanting to highlight again Hunter’s reduction of ecclesiology to “function.” Is it not a reduction of the role of the Church to state that the Church exists primarily or solely to “find the lost”? Perhaps the answer to that question depends on the understanding of the term “finding the lost.”

For Hunter, “finding the lost” seems to neglect the balanced approach between justification and sanctification that we saw in Outler’s work, as he defines it as “helping individuals to experience “justification [and] second birth.” This is the *telos* not just of evangelistic practice, but indeed, of all Church practice. As he reiterates near the end of *Radical Outreach*:

...the main business of Old East Side Church... is *not* taking care of ‘our people,’ but reaching out to people who have not experienced the gospel’s power for new life. One hundred and fifty million people in the U.S.A. alone are candidates for forgiveness, justification, second birth, and a purposeful kingdom life.<sup>51</sup>

Hunter’s soteriological understanding does not only reflect a limitation of the Methodist theological tradition; it also leads him to posit the agency of the Church in understated terms. The narrow construal of soteriological ends leads to a narrowing

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 198.

of ecclesiological agency. So framed, the practices of the Church are effective just to the extent that they participate in the Church's outreach to the unchurched and lead to both individual salvations and congregational growth. For example, Hunter states that

All of the components of the apostolic Christian movement that once won an empire are still in place: the gospel, the Scriptures, sacraments, sacred symbols, beliefs and ethics, worthy traditions, clergy and a gifted laity, a gathered worshiping community, hymns and prayers, and a hundred other recognizable features. Too often, however, underneath the veneer, the agenda has changed.<sup>52</sup>

He goes on to argue that this new agenda is inwardly focused, so that instead of being "a Christian people on a mission," the Church is only interested in "maintaining the institution and perpetuating traditions as ends in themselves."<sup>53</sup> While the institutional malaise he describes can be problematic, and while I agree with the vision of a "Christian people on a mission," Hunter connects such malaise and the loss of this missionary identity somewhat unquestioningly to rigidity inside the Church regarding the place of tradition. In short, while the practices of the Church have value and meaning as "worthy traditions," for Hunter, they retain that value just to the extent that they serve as forms of outreach to the unchurched. In fact, Hunter even offers us some sense of the direction in which this functional mission would lead the Church, inasmuch as the practices of the Church "once won an empire," and thus, might do so again, if properly directed.

Hopefully by now it is at least somewhat clearer that Hunter offers a challenge to the contemporary North American mainline Protestant Church to seek a robust ministry of outreach and evangelism, but that he does so with a soteriology that reflects the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

continued (post-Second Great Awakening) reduction of salvation to individualistic justification and transformation and an ecclesiology that narrows the Church to a functional structure that houses a set of practices that find their meaning and purpose in the primary task of evangelistic outreach. This emaciated ecclesiology reflects an understated agency ascribed to the Church that subsequently allows Hunter to conclude that practices that do not lead to the proper end (namely, evangelistic outreach to the unchurched and consequent Church growth) are practices that have lost their purpose. Therefore, Hunter argues that each congregation must make the decision between (so-called) contrary ends, pursuing either “tradition” or “mission.”

However, rather than naming a real dynamic, Hunter creates a dualism that neglects the complexity of the relationship of tradition and mission, or more broadly put, between Church and world. In other words, Hunter deeply understates the differentiation of agencies for Church and world. It is this dualism that allows Hunter to argue for forms of congregational practices that opt for “mission” rather than “tradition” evidently without struggling with the ways this posits the Church as instrument and neglects the world as the realm of disobedient principalities and powers. As a result, this dualism places Hunter in a position to suggest that the most important means by which the Church seeks to be faithful to its mission is in the adaptation of practices to context, seeking relevance and effectiveness. At the same time, he seems unaware that such a suggestion (“mission” at the cost of “tradition”) risks a total collapse of Church and world.

Hunter makes it clear that the choice of “mission” over “tradition” leads Churches to shape their practices in ways that facilitate outreach and evangelism to reach

unchurched populations. Thus, he argues that the problem with Old East Side Church is that people outside of the Church cannot but see it as culturally irrelevant. Thus, evangelism is hindered from the start, because as “the church’s members intuitively know that their unchurched friends cannot relate to Old East Side’s style, language, liturgy, and music [...] they do not even consider inviting them.”<sup>54</sup> What then should the Church do? Hunter suggests a strategy; he calls the Church to communicate the Christian faith in ways that are “culturally appropriate” to the over “150 million secular people in the American mission field.”<sup>55</sup> This, in fact, makes up one of Hunter’s key suggestions for contemporary congregational practice—the search for “cultural relevance.” For the Church to be effective and faithful in a given context for ministry, the Church must seek to “adapt to the language and culture of the people we are called to reach” which constitutes an “indigenous” strategy for ministry.<sup>56</sup> Hunter continues,

At the surface level, an indigenous ministry strategy involves adapting to the style, the language, the aesthetics, and the music of the target population. (SLAM serves as a convenient acronym.) At a deeper level, indigenous ministry involves engaging the attitudes, beliefs, and values characteristic of the society, especially the core attitudes, beliefs, and values that provide the lens, or the ‘worldview’ through which the society views the world.<sup>57</sup>

What is missing from this argument, of course, is any concern for the ways such adaptation may be a capitulation to the powers of the world. As just one, admittedly simplistic example, what consideration does the Church owe to utilizing forms of contemporary music in worship, when such forms of music are themselves commodified resources created and marketed by culture industries particularly in the United States? Is

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

such use to be understood as practicing “indigenous” adaptations in the Christian practices of worship that lead to greater perceived cultural relevance and subsequently, a more effective evangelistic outreach, or is the Church simply submitting to the service of greater powers in the world? While answering those questions for this particular issue regarding music would take us beyond our purpose here, it is enough to suggest that it is a larger problem not to ask such questions at all, as Hunter seems not to do. In other words, when the Church does not ask how far it might lean into the world without falling in, the Church enters the world at the greatest risk of taking such a fall.

It must be said that Hunter’s critique of the Church is, to some extent, well-taken, inasmuch as the North American mainline Church indeed has not subjected itself to some of these difficult questions and has not engaged in the sort of consideration that might fund a conversation about robust evangelistic practice. However, to enter this conversation with little more than a functional ecclesiology and a neutral reading of the world leads Hunter again to preference practices that tend to prefer effectiveness over faithfulness. While Hunter certainly would never consent to the characterization of suggesting an unfaithful way for the Church to follow, it must be pointed out that his recommendations do indeed open the door for such an unfortunate result, inasmuch as he seems almost unconcerned about what the Church stands to lose in its pursuit of mission over tradition.



### **1.4.3 The (Potential) Overstatement of the Church-World Differentiation: Bryan Stone**

There is another way to look at this problem. Providing contrast to Hunter's position, I turn next to consider Bryan Stone's recent book, *Evangelism After Christendom*.<sup>58</sup> Echoing Outler's concerns in the post-Great Awakening period, Stone agrees that modern Protestantism has been subject to the distortion of evangelism as "decision" or "experience" due to the individualizing forces of modernity and to an overdeveloped focus on justification as the entrance into Christian faith, rather than on sanctification as such. Thus, he also decries the focus of evangelism in modernity as that which introduces a person to the beliefs of that person's Christian faith rather than to the activities and practices that form and shape one's life into something Christ-like. In other words, Stone will agree that a focus on the relationship of initiation and discipleship in evangelism is crucial. However, unlike other writers in the Methodist tradition, Stone roots this problem in the collapse of the theological distinction of Church and world. As he writes,

As their foundation, the ethical, soteriological, and eschatological distortions of evangelism come as consequences of its being narrated by a Constantinian account of history and of the loss of a proper distinction between church and world, with a resulting loss of distinctive witness by the church in the world.<sup>59</sup>

As opposed to Hunter, who seeks an evangelism that takes its lead from the wider culture which will dictate the shape of the Church's identity and practices (making the Church more familiar and less distinct), Stone seeks to root a theology of evangelism in "the actual lived habits of the very Church which invites the world around to consider its

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<sup>58</sup> Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-7

habituated gospel.”<sup>60</sup> In short, Stone places focus on the identity and agency of the Church as central to an account of evangelism construed as witness to a watching world.

The focus on reading history with “non-Constantinian” eyes and on the necessity of a theological distinction of Church and world reveals Stone’s debt to John Howard Yoder and Yoder’s understanding of the Church’s witness. “The thesis of this book,” Stone writes, “is that the most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church...”<sup>61</sup> For Stone, this activity is “to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ.”<sup>62</sup> From this ecclesiological beginning, Stone develops a theology of evangelism that rejects the apologetic mode (on display in Hunter’s work) and replaces it with a strong focus on the formative community of the witnessing Church, shaped to witness to a distinctive way of life in the world.

However, this is not to argue, as we see in Hunter’s work, that the Church is best understood as the storehouse of practices instrumentally effective for Christian mission. Rather, Stone says, “... it is only by being drawn into communion that individuals become ‘persons’ in the first place and thereby transcend the modern constitution of the self as individualized being. Hauerwas is exactly right, therefore, when he says, ‘The first words about the Christian life are about a life together, not about the individual.’”<sup>63</sup> Consequently, this communal focus also takes focus off of the necessity of the Church’s

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<sup>60</sup> Chilcote, 236.

<sup>61</sup> Stone, 15.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid..

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 262.

growth through individual conversions as a sign of successful evangelism. Stone is not shy about stating his thesis:

It is important...to state and argue for the following premise as clearly and straightforwardly as possible as to avoid any misunderstanding: while evangelism seeks to draw persons into the life of the church as a way of inviting them to a journey of conversion, the quantitative growth of the church *is no positive indication whatsoever* that God's intention of creating a new people is being fulfilled or that God's reign is breaking into history.<sup>64</sup>

A primary concern for community in Stone gives the Church (rather than individual Christians) a primary agency in the practice of evangelism.

In a sense, Stone's book is an effort to define that very agency, described in the subtitle of his book as the practice of "Christian Witness." As evangelism is a practice "performed at boundaries and along the edges of difference," presumably between Church and world, then "nothing could be more important to a theology of evangelism," Stone argues, "than clarifying the nature of that difference and how the Christian community's posture toward the world along those boundaries is always one of both invitation and subversion."<sup>65</sup> Again drawing on Yoder, Stone clarifies that this difference is always shaped by the object of the Church's witness: Jesus. Thus, Stone argues that because evangelism is shaped by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, "we may affirm that the politics of evangelism is, from beginning to end, pacifist."<sup>66</sup> In other words, evangelism is concerned not with strategies and tactics that seek to guarantee the consent and conversion of the unbelieving, so-called "unchurched." To be so preoccupied would be to give in to a sort of violence, embodied in the need to secure

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 271. Italics in original.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 229.

outcomes measured by numerical growth in the Church. Instead, guided by the confession that Jesus is Lord, the Church cannot help but to live an evangelistic life of witness, only requiring “the peaceable simplicity of an offer and an invitation to ‘come and see.’ (John 1:46).”<sup>67</sup>

But this is where we must press further to get at Stone’s sense of that agency. What is the shape of that offer and invitation? What practices constitute such witness? Stone is quick to clarify that this stance does not exonerate the Church from a calling to engage in a form of apologetics when relating to the world, inasmuch as the “character of Christian evangelism is not only invitation but also summons.”<sup>68</sup> However, in order to keep faith with the peaceable Lord proclaimed, a pacifist evangelism engages apologetics not on epistemological or metaphysical terms, but rather, Stone argues, on “aesthetic” terms.<sup>69</sup> To rely on any other foundation would be to supplant Jesus as the foundation for the Church’s apologetic witness, and so, eschewing that, “evangelism relies from first to last on the beauty of holiness made real in the church by the operation of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>70</sup> This certainly means that the visibility of the Church and its practices in the world are key to the agency the Church has in evangelistic witness. So framed, the Church’s evangelism is subversive just to the extent that it offers visible, embodied practices that stand apart from the ways of the world and that model a peaceable way of life in the way of Jesus.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, these practices are forms of invitational

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>69</sup> Stone, 267-8.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Stone writes, “...evangelism will have to be understood...as a fundamentally subversive activity, born out of a posture of eccentricity (living ‘off center’ or ‘outside the center,’ at the margins) and out of the

evangelism, just to the extent that they provide a means for the world to see these alternative ways of life “in action.” Stone writes, “The visibility of [Christians’] witness affords us clues to how we might better share the beauty of holiness, which is the ‘apologetic’ link between faithful witness and the imaginative, alluring, and captivating reception of that witness in the world.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, Stone argues for the Church’s agency in witness to be understood in primarily “aesthetic” terms.<sup>73</sup>

This stance becomes even more understandable against the backdrop of a world understood explicitly as the realm of disobedient principalities and powers. In these terms, contra Hunter, the world is not a neutral territory from which the Church can unreflectively borrow, nor is the world a market to which the Church must be made relevant. Thus, the Church, in relationship to this world, must engage in an evangelism that is in, but not of, the world. For Stone, this requires not only the rejection of Hunter’s understatement of the Church-world difference, but a reassertion of that difference. Because there is so much at stake in this engagement with the world, the Church does not seek relevance as much as it simply offers its own life, the Church being the Church. This is evangelism as aesthetics.

While much of what Stone offers is a significant step forward in the development of a theology and practice of evangelism that takes the relationship of Church and world seriously, and while Stone relies heavily on Yoder’s work to make this argument for locating the Church’s evangelistic witness in the aesthetic display of its beautiful life to a

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cultivation of such deviant practices as sharing bread with the poor, loving enemies, refusing violence, forgiving sins, and telling the truth.” See *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-238.

so-called watching world, I argue that it is a mistake to locate that agency entirely in aesthetic terms. To limit the evangelistic engagement of the Church and the world to terms of “invitation” and “subversion” as Stone seems to do is to leave too much unsaid about the nature of their intersection. Consequently, I argue that Stone represents an alternative to Hunter’s understatement, but goes just a bit too far, resulting in a position that *overstates* the difference of Church and world in evangelism. While affirming much of Stone’s work, and acknowledging, again, that his is perhaps the only work in Methodist theology of evangelism to take seriously the theological relationship of Church and world, I want to push Stone further, to resist overstatement, but not to embrace understatement in the process. In short, I want Stone to say more about the shape of that intersection between agents in evangelism and to move toward a position that leans both ways at once.

Stone’s overstatement begins with his identification of the Church as “the primary cultural and linguistic context for evangelism and conversion.”<sup>74</sup> This is an uncontroversial claim until it is paired with Stone’s concern for articulating the Church’s engagement with the world in evangelism. This leads Stone to consider “the initial process of invitation and formation” which he calls “a work of extratextual imagination.”<sup>75</sup> By articulating this engagement in extratextual terms, Stone is staking a position in distinction to the unquestioned apologetics displayed in Hunter’s work. Yet, when he explains further, we see that Stone’s understanding of extratextual engagement suggests an evangelism embodied primarily in the terms of an aesthetic display.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 267.

“Coming to faith,” Stone argues, “begins with an imaginative ‘drawing’ of persons into a new world by the church that... if apologetic at all, is so in a chiefly aesthetic sense.”<sup>76</sup>

While such a position charts a course that seeks to keep the Church from losing itself in the evangelistic engagement with the world, it says too little about what sorts of engagements are possible. In short, the question is, What forms of “extratextuality” can be faithfully employed? At what point does extratextuality as evangelistic practice overcome the formative effect of intratextual practices of formation?

Stone does point out that the mode of extratextuality in evangelism allows for a further particularization and contextualization of the Church’s evangelistic practices for the purpose of faithfully presenting the gospel through the Church exactly where it is and with whom it lives. However, I believe that Stone lacks a substantive consideration and exemplary illustration of how this particular practice literally “works” in a congregational context. While Stone emphasizes evangelism by virtue of the Church’s aesthetic offering of its own life, that life surely does include forms of engagement with the world, for instance, in the work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Stone knows this, but in his account of evangelism, he leaves this acknowledgment understated, so that the reader is left with the conclusion that the purity and the holiness of the Church’s internal life is the primary source for its evangelistic witness.

Placing the emphasis this way articulates a Methodist concern for emphasizing the formation of holiness in the sanctified life as well as the pardoning work of God in justification and regeneration. But it tends to identify holiness as the center of difference between Church and world: the Church is holy, the world is not. What this placement

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 267-268.

minimizes, however, is the way that holiness narrates both the difference between Church and world *as well as* the mode of the Church's engagement with the world. Holiness for Methodists is not embodied only in the Church's display of righteousness, but in the ways such a righteous People live in and engage the world.

In short, the concern raised here is that such a position, limiting holiness to aesthetic display, understates the Church's agency, leaving room to develop a more robust, complicated account of the ways the Church engages the world in evangelism. In turn, understating the Church's agency in evangelism leads to an overstatement of the theological differentiation of Church and world. To recall the terms Langford introduced, this is a position that rightly emphasizes the confessional pole and that rightly exercises concern over the effort to be apologetic. Yet, we seek a balance, a leaning both ways at once. Seeking this, a further engagement with the agencies of Church and world will be necessary to articulate a Methodist theology and practice of evangelism capable of such simultaneous leaning.

#### **1.4.4 Living Within Over-and Understated Accounts: Arias, Abraham, Jones**

Hunter and Stone serve as examples of extremes within Methodist theology of evangelism, respectively displaying understated and overstated understandings of the Church-world differentiation. Now, we turn to consider the locations of other authors on that spectrum. Like Outler, these theologians often seek to articulate a theology of evangelism in terms that move beyond the limited focus bequeathed particularly by the Second Great Awakening. They locate evangelism not only in justification and conversion, but also in terms of sanctification and an ongoing life of discipleship along



the *via salutis*. Yet, they resist the limitation of evangelical concern to the life of the solitary Christian, and move beyond solely individual salvation to articulate evangelism within a larger theological, eschatological frame. These voices led to salutary developments in the late twentieth century conversation, as they encouraged deeper reflection on the ministry of evangelism and promised to help overcome the problematic division between evangelism and social action. Resisting the reduction of evangelism to the practice of verbal proclamation for the sake of spiritual renewal, evangelism within an eschatological framework recalled its connections to the divine *missio* of redemption and reconciliation for all Creation and rooted it in history, not solely in the inner sanctum of one's so-called private spiritual life.

The question I pose in reading this work, however, pertains to the identity and agency granted to Church and to world in these theologies of evangelism. While there may be general agreement (allowing for distinctions, of course) among late-twentieth-century Methodists over placing evangelism in the orbit of eschatology, I argue that these authors display varying degrees of attention to the identity and agency of both Church and world. This range of attention is problematic particularly for Methodists, given the relative lack of ecclesiological reflection within the tradition over past decades. Without adequate reflection on the identity and agency of Church and world in the development of a theology and practice of evangelism, the possibility of an account that is capable of “leaning both ways” is negated. Thus, this consideration of other modern Methodist authors in evangelism will lead us toward the need for further work in developing a Methodist theology of evangelism.

#### 1.4.4.1 Mortimer Arias

Like many Methodist authors who write after him, in his book, *Announcing the Reign of God*, Arias begins with concern for modern evangelism that simply has personal, individual conversion and entrance into the Church as its only goal.<sup>77</sup> Arias argues that this goal amounts to a modern amnesia in theology of evangelism for the significance of the Reign of God for the preaching and ministry of Jesus. Thus, he asks, if for Jesus evangelization is no more and no less than announcing the reign of God, what would this mean for contemporary theology and practice of evangelism? Following in the footsteps of Outler, Arias draws from his long engagement in the ecumenical movement and brings this involvement into conversation with his experience and commitment to a theology of liberation as he argues for an eschatological evangelism. The result is a theological appraisal of evangelism that makes room for both Church and world, albeit in ways that call for further attention.

Framed in eschatological perspective, evangelism for Arias finds its meaning as the life and ministry of a Church that discovers that it lives in between the now and the not yet. In this frame, “eschatology becomes mission, because we have been sent not as prophets of doom but as evangelists of hope: to announce the coming reign of God!”<sup>78</sup> But that “announcement” for Arias is much more than the verbal proclamation of the gospel. In an acknowledgement of the agency of the world, Arias argues that the Kingdom that Jesus announces in his life and ministry is a Kingdom that is

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<sup>77</sup> Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 2001).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

“confrontational” to a world that finds the offer of Jesus’ new inclusive community to be a threat. Thus, Arias concludes, “as we see it in the Gospels, then, the coming of the Kingdom means a permanent confrontation of worlds.”<sup>79</sup> While this makes intelligible the necessary practice of repentance and conversion as part of the evangelistic conversation, it would be a mistake, Arias argues, to limit such a transformation to the shifting of an “inner attitude.”<sup>80</sup> Instead, evangelism in an eschatological frame takes seriously the principalities and powers of the world, and thus calls for an engagement of the world that

takes the shape of prophetic denunciation of personal and public sin; of confrontation of powers and institutions; of unmasking ideologies and traditions; of challenge to unbelief, prejudice, and hostility; and of challenge also to triumphalistic belief. Finally, it takes the form of repentance, conversion, and radical discipleship.<sup>81</sup>

Anything less than this results in a theology and practice of evangelism that falls short of witness to the Kingdom of God and functions instead as a form of propaganda.<sup>82</sup>

Arias then turns to consider the shape and the agency of the Church that announces the Reign of God to the world as “gift,” “hope,” and “challenge.”<sup>83</sup> The Church’s task in evangelism is not simply to proclaim the story, as if the story were separable from the life of the Church itself; instead, “the church becomes an instrument as well as part of the story. Christians become living letters and new chapters of the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 89; Arias quotes Carl Braaten, who writes, “Without its roots in the universal promise, missionary faith becomes indistinguishable from religious propaganda.” Carl E. Braaten, *The Flaming Center: A Theology of Christian Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), 54..

<sup>83</sup> These constitute the themes for Chapters 6, 7, and 8 in *Announcing the Reign of God*.

story.”<sup>84</sup> This understanding is an invitation to move beyond a focus on the internal life of the Church and to embrace the many ways in which the Church actively engages the world “proclaiming forgiveness” and “defending life.”<sup>85</sup> Arias is resistant to any move to spiritualize such practices, and instead, sees them as ways with/in which the Church engages the world. This he clarifies by drawing from the Melbourne Conference of the WCC, which proclaims that “in their witness to the Kingdom of God in words and deeds the churches must dare to be present *at the bleeding points of humanity* and thus near those who suffer evil, even taking the risk of being counted among the wicked.”<sup>86</sup>

If, however, this stance leads us to believe that the Church is only present to the world as this embodied gift, Arias is also clear that the Church is sometimes called to resistance, challenging the world via a “ministry of denunciation.”<sup>87</sup> This ministry is the calling to acknowledge that the Church must “denounce anything, any program, any trend which opposes God’s purpose for humanity.”<sup>88</sup> Arias recognizes that the reign of God is not an ideology or a social order to which we can point or easily describe. Thus, Arias calls for an agency that “leans both ways at once:” “We need both the prophetic distance from any particular order and the freedom to engage ourselves with the rest of society to work for the common good.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, Arias is calling for engagement with the complicated question of the Church’s differentiation from and engagement with the world in evangelism. While this call moves in positive directions, however, Arias leaves

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<sup>84</sup> Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God*, 70.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-77,

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

the theme of the Church's identity and agency underdeveloped. Surely, the Church is called to be and to offer itself as "gift," "hope," and "challenge," but such descriptions require more reflection on the forms and practices that render the Church as such.

For example, his inquiry leads him, later in the book, to consider the practice of discernment. He rightly suggests that "one of the most difficult challenges for Christians today is to test the spirits, to read the signs of the times, to see clearly where the line of division between the Kingdom and the antikingdom is today."<sup>90</sup> Yet, it is not entirely clear that it is the Church that is practicing such discernment. When he asks the question, "How do we discern the signs of the kingdom," he turns to an ecumenical statement generated before the Melbourne gathering, and argues that the Kingdom of God can be discerned

where a just order is sought; there, where human life is respected and a full life is fostered; there, where women and men live in solidarity; there, where the structures of society try to favor 'the orphan, the widow and the poor'; there, where human beings have the opportunity to become what God intends them to be; **THERE**, the kingdom of God is at work.<sup>91</sup>

While I would not argue against these signs as reflective of a hope for the possible shape of God's reign embodied on earth, I wonder where the Church appears in this discernment. While a theological reading of these signs in the world would be the particular work of the Church, what is left underdeveloped is any reflection on how the Church practices such discernment.

While framing evangelism in eschatological terms that lead him to acknowledge the theological necessity of the difference of Church and world, Arias is not always clear

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 109. Emphasis in original.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

about the identity and agency of the Church, or about the necessity of such reflection in the construction of evangelistic mission. In the end, he clarifies his call to “recover the communal dimension of the church—and of evangelization,” and finally ties this call to the “great and unique resources in the local churches,” where “a holistic announcement of the kingdom can take place as the natural projection of the local church in proclamation, fellowship, celebration, teaching and learning, and service.”<sup>92</sup> But this sentence begs for more detail. How do these practices serve as “natural projections” of the “holistic announcement” of the Kingdom of God? Is evangelism most specifically the work of the congregation? If so, how shall we speak of the identity and agency of the Church understood in broader terms? More specifically, this demand for clarification also asks how Arias’ vision is a distinctively *Methodist* vision. While clearly located in the Methodist tradition, Arias neglects in this work to reflect on the relationship of his eschatological evangelism and contemporary Methodist theology and practice of evangelism.

Despite its brevity, Arias’ *Announcing the Reign of God* stands as a classic text in the modern theology of evangelism. It resurrected the necessity for a richer theological engagement with the Bible and Christian tradition for the development of a theology of evangelism, the fruit of which was the critical linkage of evangelism and eschatology. While this engagement led Arias to reflect on the identity and agency of both Church and world and thus, to gesture toward forms of the Church’s engagement with the world in evangelism, we have also seen how Arias left room in his work for further development of these themes.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 119-120

#### 1.4.4.2 William Abraham

In one of the more robust examples of a theology of evangelism published in the wake of Outler's work, William Abraham argued (echoing Arias) for the centrality of eschatology to develop a "logic of evangelism."<sup>93</sup> Against limited conceptions of evangelism that focus on anthropocentric and individualistic concerns alone—thus, resulting in evangelism's being primarily concerned with proclamation, personal conversion, and consequent Church growth—Abraham widens the aperture to develop a vision of evangelism in eschatological terms.<sup>94</sup> If in Christ God does not simply create the possibility for the salvation of individuals, but rather, initiates a new Kingdom that is now and not yet, then Evangelism must be similarly framed. For Abraham, he defines evangelism as "primary initiation into the kingdom of God."<sup>95</sup>

Rooted in this move to consider the grammar and practices associated with such "initiation," the "logic" of evangelism that follows includes much more than simply verbal proclamation aimed at conversion as the end of evangelistic practice. Instead, as Abraham writes, "if we are to take initiation into the kingdom of God seriously, then we need in our evangelism to find room for conversion, baptism, and a commitment to love God and neighbor as elements of initiation."<sup>96</sup> Apparent here is Abraham's view of the importance of the Church as the embodied community that employs such practices in its

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<sup>93</sup> William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>94</sup> Abraham reflects the work of Arias here in *Announcing the Reign of God*, in the call for a Kingdom focus for evangelism. He argues, "Any considered attempt to develop a coherent concept of evangelism that will be serviceable in the present must begin with eschatology." See Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 17.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

common life. Indeed, as a Methodist, Abraham emphasizes the “pivotal role played by small groups in the assimilation of Christians into the central privileges and responsibilities of the faith... Wesley’s evangelism required and depended upon the development of class meetings and a plethora of other groups.”<sup>97</sup> However, Abraham resists the tendency to leave consideration of the Christian community on this “utilitarian” level: “Becoming part of the Christian community is not just a utilitarian affair; it constitutes part of initiation.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, in the eschatological frame, the Church takes its place as the “Israel of God,” the “eschatological community” established by God. Thus, “it is, therefore, incoherent to say that one can enter that reign but remain outside the church.”<sup>99</sup>

Despite this rooting in eschatological terms and a consequent reflection on the nature of the Church within this eschatological framework, Abraham does not pursue deeper reflection on the nature of the world nor on the Church’s relationship to it in evangelism. Early on in the book, there is an acknowledgement that an eschatological lens leads to a different way of seeing the world: “The world of eschatology is not our world; it is a strange universe of divine intervention and angelic activity, of Messiah and Son of Man, of woes and resurrections, of cosmic powers of evil, of vindications and judgments, of the end of time and history.”<sup>100</sup> Further, Abraham is quite right to point out that to see the world in just this way is to assume a belief in a God who “created the world for certain intentions and purposes,” and who remains active “in history and at the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 18.



end of all history” seeking to fulfill these divine ends not through disembodied action, but rather through “the life of the people of Israel” who “pave the way for the coming of the kingdom in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>101</sup> The theological foundation is established here for further reflection on the distinction between and relationship of Church and world in evangelism.

Yet, even with the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the particular People of God as foundational theological commitments in his developing theology of evangelism, Abraham’s account suffers in two distinct areas. First, as we will see, his account lacks adequate engagement with the identity and agency of the world as the world of principalities and powers, reflecting instead a characteristic tendency in modern theology of evangelism to address “culture” rather than “world.” As a result, secondly, Abraham fails to offer an account that adequately connects a concern for ecclesial identity with evangelistic engagement with the world. In other words familiar to the argument in this chapter (and in this dissertation), Abraham leaves more to be said about the complicated distinction between Church and world, as well as about their relationship to one another in the practice of evangelism.

In the first place, Abraham fails to offer further consideration of the nature of the world as the realm of disobedient principalities and powers. He does, however, move in this direction when he devotes a chapter to consideration of “Evangelism and Modernity.”<sup>102</sup> There, he argues that the acids of modernity, particularly the influence of a creeping secularism in the modern West, have led to an evangelism shaped by technical

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>102</sup> See Abraham Chapter 9, 185 and ff.

and pragmatic concerns.<sup>103</sup> This assertion leads Abraham to conclude that “modern evangelism has become a kind of entrepreneurial industry organized, funded, and run like a modern corporation.”<sup>104</sup> Still, despite the self-admittedly overdrawn description of evangelism’s state, this allegation leads Abraham to call for a turn away from the effort to describe modernity and toward a renewed engagement with apologetics.

Abraham recommends that all moves to describe modern cultural reality deserve suspicion, inasmuch as such descriptions are all subject to the critique that they are not fundamentally true (revealed) narratives. Thus, evangelism is not beholden to the terms of the discussion endemic to such descriptions. As he writes, “the fundamental sources of inspiration do not rest on empirical or quasi-empirical accounts of the modern world. Hence there is no good reason why the evangelist should be intimidated by prophets of doom who argue that the prospects for evangelism are bleak in the extreme.”<sup>105</sup> Thus, he concludes, “we can insist that the evangelist can face the modern world in all its shapes and forms with integrity and equanimity.”<sup>106</sup> Evangelists can trust that their reading of the world is faithful and that their consequent speech and practices are responsive to context. How can this be the case?

Abraham argues that if evangelists develop their engagement with the world on the basis of the “internal logic of the Christian gospel,” and if that engagement is grounded in “fortitude, patience, modesty, and a deep faith in the Holy Spirit,” then there

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 198-199.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 204.

will be a way for Christians to engage the world apologetically.<sup>107</sup> To be clear, Abraham is aware of the problems of modern apologetics, and is unquestionably arguing against any call to accommodate the gospel or its claims in order to attain a hearing amid a secularized modern culture. Yet, he is clearly calling for evangelism's engagement with modern culture through apologetic practices, tempered with commitments to shape such engagement "on the internal logic of the Christian gospel."<sup>108</sup> In other words, the apologetic engagement with the world is shaped primarily by the calling to proclaim and witness to the "coming rule of God in Christ," and not by a desire to shape the message to make a "bargain with the world [offering] reduced faith in return for assent and service."<sup>109</sup> In the end, this engagement constitutes a theology of evangelism, and Abraham underwrites the necessity of this engagement.

Yet, as I suggested above, I find that he leaves room to say more about the shape of this engagement in two areas. First, Abraham shows a lack of deeper consideration of the nature of modern culture as part of the world of principalities and powers. He limits consideration of the world to contemporary philosophical reflections on "modern culture," and subsequently finds it lacking the theological density to be taken seriously as a partner for conversation in evangelistic practice. Yet, this lack of theological reading of the world leads to the second problem, namely, the disconnection between ecclesiological identity and agency and the Church's evangelistic engagement with the world.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 205-206.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

This criticism might seem surprising, given Abraham's clarification of the agents involved in evangelism.<sup>110</sup> In a section concerning the significance of the Holy Spirit to the practice of formation and particularly Confirmation, Abraham reminds us that the Holy Spirit's coming to the early Church was "a constitutive part of the fulfillment of the eschatological promises to Israel," thus clarifying the significance of the ecclesial community as the Body sent in mission.<sup>111</sup> At the same time, Abraham also reminds us that a commitment to the work of the Spirit clarifies that the Kingdom of God is not established by human means, but is the work of God to which the Church is sent into the world to witness. Here we find some mention of the challenge Christians face when sent into the world in evangelism: "Those called to give themselves in active service in the rule of God need some assurance that they do not face the world on their own but that they can face it with hope, knowing that they will be accompanied, led, and used by the Holy Spirit."<sup>112</sup> In this light, Abraham is led to reiterate the importance of initiation and formation for this engagement. Engaging the world in evangelistic mission "requires a life of watchfulness and discipline. It cannot be achieved without continuous recourse to the fountains of mercy, love, and grace provided in the church."<sup>113</sup> He goes on to clarify the necessity of spiritual disciplines, especially attendance at Eucharist, for such formation.<sup>114</sup>

With this clarification, it comes as no surprise that Abraham argues that the Church be considered one of four "agents" in evangelism, along with the Triune God, the

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<sup>110</sup> Abraham makes this clarification on pages 103-4.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-161.

evangelizer, and the evangelized.<sup>115</sup> Specifically addressing the role of the Church in evangelism, Abraham argues that this community “is called to embody the rule of God in its worship, life, and ministries, to identify and to nourish those whom God has specially called to the work of evangelism, and to share with them in their characteristic activity as evangelists.”<sup>116</sup> He strengthens these claims for the crucial mediating role of the Church in a theology of evangelism in an article written more than a decade later.<sup>117</sup> Abraham says,

While formally it is right to insist on a logical distinction between the church and the kingdom, contingently and in reality, there is no kingdom without a community, the church, and there is no church without the presence of the kingdom. God’s reign has always had an Israel, an ecclesia, in history; it is not some sort of ahistorical, asocial reality.<sup>118</sup>

This density given the Church by Abraham in his later article then leads to his redeployment of the Church as a crucial agent in the practice of evangelism. Again, Abraham:

...to treat the church as just one dimension of entry into the kingdom is to underplay the place of the church in the work of making disciples. The life of the church is not just prudentially related to Christian discipleship; it is the place where one learns the very art of discipleship...It is the church which has been commissioned by God to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to all the world, to call all people into discipleship, and to provide the crucial teachings and practices which are the marks of all true disciples of Jesus Christ. In short, it is

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 103-4.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>117</sup> In his chapter “On Making Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ,” Abraham argues that evangelism as initiation does not require “a choice between the church and the kingdom,” but rather “a position which holds that both of these must be taken into consideration at once,” and “when we do so we find that they complement each other in a deep way.” See William Abraham, “On Making Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ,” in *Marks of the Body of Christ*, eds. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 159.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

the church which carries the right to identify the normative content of Christian initiation.<sup>119</sup>

This agency extends for Abraham to consideration of movements outside the Church, recognizing that the agency given the Church by God for evangelism is an agency that can be located elsewhere, in the world. Even so, Abraham confesses that

Even in those cases where agents of the gospel may have to operate outside the boundaries of the church because of its corruption and sin, and even though we can rejoice that God uses such agents to achieve his good purposes, these agents are themselves dependent on the church for the resources of their decisions and practices.<sup>120</sup>

In contrast to the somewhat emaciated account of the identity and agency of the Church we saw in Arias' work, Abraham makes a clear argument here for ecclesiological mediation, and does not limit that vision to the local Church. For Abraham, the Church has priority, epistemically and practically and, in turn this gives shape to the evangelistic engagement with the world that it must pursue.

This characteristic activity, for Abraham, results in an argument for a renewed apologetics. However, because he disconnects this evangelistic/apologetic engagement from thicker consideration of the risks of the world (culture is a stable, secular reading of the world, thus easily dismissed, or avoided), he underestimates what is at stake, or at risk, in the evangelistic practice of apologetics. Indeed, we ask, why is the world itself not invited to be considered an agent on the team Abraham gathers for evangelistic practice? Even while he maintains a commitment to the Church's necessity as an agent in the practice of evangelism, Abraham does not offer any more developed sense of the

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

world's agency, and thus, cannot offer any thicker theological account of the Church's relationship to the world in evangelism.

While Arias and Abraham both ground a theology of evangelism in eschatology, they err (by my account) by underemphasizing one half of the Church-world relationship. We have seen Arias' concern for naming the presence of the "antikingdom" in the world, and the consequent need for the Church to engage the world with both grace and challenge. In Arias, we find acknowledgement of the principalities and the powers in the world and the ways in which their identity and agency come to bear on an account of evangelism. Yet, we have also seen how Arias leaves more to be said about the identity and agency of this evangelistic Church. In Abraham, the problem is inverted. Whereas he brings greater focus to the identity and agency of the Church, he does so without an adequate account of the world.

It should be clear that any critique of Abraham's book must be paired with the acknowledgement that without this work, the critical and constructive theological reflection on the practice of evangelism that has unfolded over the past twenty-five years may not have developed as it has. More particularly, Abraham's focus on eschatology, and consequently, on the calling forth of a particular People, formed in the means of grace and sent in evangelistic mission to the world, was a key step forward for contemporary theology and practice of evangelism, and it shows us a fruitful direction to pursue in linking ecclesiology and evangelism. Yet, as we have also seen, when it comes to articulating an evangelism that takes seriously the identity and the agency of both Church and world, leaning both ways at once, Abraham leaves room for more to be said.

#### 1.4.4.3 Scott Jones

At first glance, Scott Jones' work, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor*, might seem to meet this need, inasmuch as his book is a response to Abraham's work in *The Logic of Evangelism* and a book that offers more practical reflection on the Church's engagement with evangelism.<sup>121</sup> True to his Methodist heritage, Jones begins his consideration of evangelism by placing focus on the God revealed in the Bible as a God of love and grace. Jones argues that the wholeness of scripture proclaims the love of God, and God's love for the creation, and especially for humans. This love leads to the coming of Christ and Christ's proclamation of the reign of God, which calls forth a response: The appropriate response to the Kingdom of God is the living of a life of discipleship.<sup>122</sup> The primary context where this takes place is, of course, in the Church, and more particularly, in the congregation.<sup>123</sup>

This is where Jones parts ways with Abraham, specifically with what he believes is Abraham's conceptual error in *The Logic of Evangelism*. Namely, Jones argues that by defining the Church as an indispensable agent in the practice of evangelism, and by understanding evangelism as initiation into the reign of God, Abraham is guilty of limiting the extension of the reign of God to the boundaries of the Church. In other words, Jones suggests that for Abraham, if the Church is not present, then persons cannot be evangelized—or in other words, initiated into the reign of God. For Jones, this assumption is problematic, particularly as it limits the reign of God and, more

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<sup>121</sup> Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003).

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-76.



importantly, violates the sovereignty of God.<sup>124</sup> The definition of evangelism as primary initiation into the reign of God creates this problem and overstates the importance of the Church as part of that process. Thus, instead of direct initiation into the reign of God, as Abraham suggests, Jones argues that the “primary initiation” of evangelism is to discipleship in response to the reign of God. What follows from this change in perspective is Jones’ argument that the “logic of discipleship” follows such initiation, which includes movements through baptism, cognitive commitments, spiritual disciplines, conversion, morality, spiritual gifts, and faith-sharing.

Jones argues that by focusing on discipleship as a response to the reign of God, and consequently, on evangelism as invitation to that life of discipleship, the theological error of linking the boundaries of the Church and the reign of God can be avoided. However, this does not mean that the Church becomes unimportant. Instead, Jones argues that a clarification of Abraham’s claim to the Church’s agency in evangelism is required that is, in fact, an intensification of an ecclesiological focus. Rather than relying on what might be read in Abraham’s account to be a less concrete/more abstract understanding of the Church, Jones calls for focus on the specific, embodied congregation as the primary (but not exclusive) context for evangelistic practice. It is in the congregation, of course, that many of the practices associated with the logic of discipleship find their meaning. For instance, baptism and the nurture of spiritual discipline, while not necessarily limited to the practice of the gathered congregation, tend to assume the existence of a gathered, visible, worshipping community. Jones elaborates on this claim in a separate chapter considering the relationship of ecclesiology and

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 70.

evangelism, arguing that the connection between the life of discipleship and the local congregation is tight enough that location in the Church is crucial: “the ecclesial aspect of initiation into Christian discipleship requires that the individual find some congregation to join.”<sup>125</sup> In other words, the congregation is crucial, if not the irreplaceable location for evangelistic practice. In this way, he articulates what Arias only summarizes: the ways in which the congregation is a body of Christians on the *via salutis*, formed over time as disciples of Jesus Christ.

At the same time, however, the focus on congregation as context for the formation of discipleship also leads to a concern. In the effort to distance himself from Abraham’s commitment to the Church (not just to the congregation) as an agent in the evangelistic task, Jones may limit his readers’ imagination just to the extent that one is led to equate congregation and Church. Jones, now serving as a Bishop in the United Methodist Church, surely would not endorse such an equation. Yet, I raise the concern here inasmuch as one can read beyond Jones’ focus on the logic of discipleship to see the Church in rather instrumental terms, a repository for these formative and evangelistic practices. This understanding is problematic, as an understatement of the Church’s agency is evident both in the equation of Church and congregation and in the reduction of evangelism to describe congregational practices of formation and witness. In Jones’ chapter considering evangelism and ecclesiology, this understatement is made evident when he articulates his understanding of the Church as a “means of grace,” and “the locus

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 141.

where God's grace is most consistently found."<sup>126</sup> The Church becomes the location where doctrine is "learned, elaborated, and tested," and where worship and sacraments are "experienced."<sup>127</sup> But in these terms, how can we speak of the Church's evangelism as a witness beyond the congregation? While Jones would surely accept an account of ecclesiology and evangelism that articulates the agency of the Church beyond the congregation, we do not find that account in this book. Here, evangelism is limited to the agency of congregational practices and the formative work they do in Christian lives.

In part, Jones must make this attenuated claim regarding the agency of the Church in order to distance himself from what he thinks of Abraham's overstated position. Thus, while Jones argues that the work of "evangelism is most suited for congregations," he must make the further claim that "persons may well be initiated into the reign of God outside the ministry of the church."<sup>128</sup> In short, the Church is important to the practice of evangelism, but it is not irreplaceable. It certainly is not a mediating body. Under these circumstances, the Church cannot have any more agency than that which Jones ascribes to it, and thus, the Church displays minimal agency in evangelism, its role limited to that of a repository for the practices of discipleship.

This understatement of the Church's agency is paired in Jones' work with an understatement of the world's agency. Jones takes up the question of the contextualization or enculturation of the gospel, quoting Dana Robert, and echoing a key

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 151. Jones considers the identification of the Church as a "means of grace" in Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 255-256. See also Richard P. Heitzenrater, "Wesleyan Ecclesiology: Methodism as a Means of Grace," in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology*, ed. S.T. Kimbrough Jr. (New York, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 119-128.

<sup>127</sup> Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor*, 151.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 73, 76.

concern in this dissertation: “Fixing upon a balance between contextualization and remaining faithful to the core of the gospel is an ongoing issue in missiology.”<sup>129</sup> Jones engages the question as a Methodist, through the theological lens of the incarnation (“Since Christ is God put into human flesh, the gospel can be put into other languages and cultural forms”<sup>130</sup>) and the universal love of God (“God’s love embraces everyone in the world, and God intends that all persons should be saved. Hence, the gospel needs to reach all persons where they are.”<sup>131</sup>). Such claims lead Jones to argue that Christians are called to love not only people, but also the cultures within which they live. While this argument may raise some questions (namely, when does the Christian choose to adhere to or renounce certain cultural practices?), Jones is clear that immersion within the context is theologically warranted and practically necessary for evangelistic mission.

But such immersion does not necessarily lead to unquestioned acceptance or adaptation to context, as we might expect from Hunter. Instead, Jones does consider the critique of market-driven evangelistic practices leveled by Philip Kenneson and James Street, as well as those who champion such techniques for the sake of Church growth.<sup>132</sup> While one side calls for the distinctiveness of the Christian community and the other for the Church to seek its relevance in every context, Jones asks, channeling the concern within this dissertation project, “Is it possible that both are partially right?”<sup>133</sup> He charts a path between their divergent concerns by placing focus on discipleship, rightly recognizing that the Church is always called to faithfulness within a context that is

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 128-132.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 131.

always local and particular, and thus, that there will necessarily be adherence to and renunciation of cultural practices as a congregation seeks to embody a faithful and evangelistic witness.<sup>134</sup>

What is missing from this consideration is, of course, theological reflection on the world's agency as a world of principalities and powers. The problem is that Jones' consideration of this "ongoing issue" of developing faithful contextualization of the gospel takes place within an inadequate theological framework. In short, by placing focus where he does theologically (on the incarnation and, in the Methodist way, on the universality of God's love and grace) in order to underwrite contextualization practices, he effectively blinds himself to the broader theological framework that would make necessary the consideration of the world's agency within the creative and redemptive work of God in Christ.

Jones further articulates the particularity of evangelism viewed within a Methodist framework, as he construes discipleship's logic according to the way of repentance, justification, and sanctification, all within the realm of God's love expressed as grace. This move clarifies the Wesleyan terrain of Abraham and Jones' understanding of evangelism and its relationship to the Church and to formation in discipleship along the way of salvation. However, like Abraham, Jones' account also falls short of offering a detailed consideration of the identity and agency of the Church or the world, or of their differentiation and relationship in a theology of evangelism. In fact, while Jones' account builds on Abraham in order to further clarify the key relationship between formation,

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<sup>134</sup> Jones writes, "The determination of context is a complex matter of judgment." *Ibid.*, 132.

discipleship, and evangelism, it takes some steps backward in helping a Methodist community faithfully determine its relationship to the world in mission and evangelism.

Despite his effort to clarify the conceptual problems he detects in Abraham's account, Jones introduces further problems. First, he makes the agency of the Church optional—so that evangelism can happen without the Church. In fact, for Jones, the Church is less a “people” called to witness, but is, rather, a context of practices that effectively carry the agency associated with evangelistic witness. In other words, by rendering the Church as merely a “means of grace,” Jones delegitimizes the identity of the Church as an active agent in the practice of evangelism. Second, by undermining that agency, he undermines the Church's capacity to relate to the world in evangelism. This means that Jones takes Abraham's position, which begins as a position that moves in the direction of being a “leaning in both directions,” and renders it an “understated” position.

This critique, however, does not limit the ways in which Jones' argument is deeply helpful to the development of a proper theology of evangelism, just to the extent that it reflects the significant connections in a Methodist theology of evangelism between conversion and formation. Ironically, a more robust account of the world's agency, which Jones lacks, would vindicate his position, as we will see in Chapter 2, by emphasizing the focus on discipleship as aim and result of evangelism. A focus on formation is key to the development of faithful discernment, which I will argue is a key practice of evangelism inside the agency of the world. Thus, Jones argues for the embrace of worldly practices for evangelism, but without enough attention paid to the Church's agency in order to navigate that relationship faithfully.

## 1.5 Conclusion

As I have argued, we see in the late twentieth century helpful developments in Methodist theologies of evangelism. Discussion moved beyond the concerns bequeathed to modern evangelism via the Second Great Awakening and embraced the Methodist relationship in evangelism between justification and sanctification, conversion and discipleship in the *via salutis*. Still, I have also argued that in contemporary theology of evangelism among Methodist authors, the relationship of Church and world is often out of balance. While some tend to understate the Church-world difference, resulting in the Church's unreflective and unquestioned embrace of the world, others lean in the opposite direction. The overstatement of the differentiation of Church and world leads to a Church that offers the world only a picture of itself, without adequate account of the engagement or involvement the evangelistic Church must have in the world. To move beyond these limitations, we see the need for a more engaged theology of evangelism that takes *both* Church and world seriously, avoiding under- and overstatement and seeking an account of evangelism that "leans both ways at once." Thus, from here, we move forward to pursue deeper engagement with two questions: first, "What is the agency of the world?" (Chapter 2), and then, "What is the agency of the Church?" (Chapter 3). These questions serve as the prelude to the constructive task taken up in later chapters: articulating a Methodist theology of evangelism that reflects concern for the agencies of Church and world, but that inevitably avoids the problematic under-and overstatement often present in Methodist theology of evangelism.

## CHAPTER 2

*“What are principalities and powers? What is their significance in the creation and in the fall? What is their relationship to human sin? How are these powers related to the presence and power of death in history? What is the meaning of the confrontation between Christ and the principalities? Does a Christian have any freedom from their dominion? There can be no serious, realistic, or biblical comprehension of the witness of the Church in the world unless such questions as these are raised and pondered.”<sup>1</sup>*

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will argue that when the Church engages in evangelistic mission, it must acknowledge the complexity within which all such action occurs. The Church’s life and its practice of evangelism all take place in time, in history—or, in biblical terms, within the “world.” This is not to say that when we speak of the world we speak of a neutral “context” or an inert “environment” within which evangelists choose freely how to engage in the proclamation of the gospel. More specifically, to speak of the world is to speak of creation, at once called good by the God who formed it and yet fallen and under the sway of disobedient principalities and powers. While language concerning “the powers” has played an increasingly significant role within twentieth-century theology and ethics (after a long period of absence in theological discourse), it has not played as significant a role in contemporary practical theology, save for a few counter-examples.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1964; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 51-2. Citations refer to the Wipf and Stock edition.

<sup>2</sup> Marva Dawn offers a brief summary of this history in chapter one of her book, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). However, hers is just one of a very few works that explicitly reflects upon the principalities and powers in entering into conversation with



However, in the larger effort to articulate a theology and practice of evangelism within the distinction of Church and world, these reflections are required. They are required precisely because to see an environment as creation, or as the “world” of principalities and powers, is a theological judgment, and to determine the shape of evangelistic engagement with that world requires theological judgment. Thus, some account of formation is necessary to shape such judgment.

The relationship of evangelistic mission and formation is a key issue derivative of the larger concern for the relationship of the Church and the world. In short, an account of formation without evangelistic mission is a move toward sectarianism (overstatement), and an account of mission without formation is a move toward unquestioning, apologetic translation (understatement). Concern for both formation and mission is concern for the relationship and the balancing between supporting the Church’s traditioned identity and the Church’s missional intelligibility. A consideration of the theological status of the world is necessary to develop this point, in order to prepare the way for the development of a missional ecclesiology that seeks to “lean both ways at once,” always into both formation and evangelistic mission as constitutive of its identity and action in the world. Thus, in this chapter, I ask, what is the agency of the world, and what impact does the agency of the world have on a theology of evangelism?

To ask such a question, however, is to invite the skepticism of contemporary Methodists. After all, it was none other than John Wesley himself who said, “I look upon

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contemporary forms of practical theology. See also Charles Campbell’s book, *The Word Before the Powers: an Ethic of Preaching*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2002).

all the world as my parish,”<sup>3</sup> and contemporary United Methodists claim their mission to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, to begin the chapter’s argument, I will show the ways in which contemporary Methodists tend to emphasize the created goodness of the world without adequate attention paid to the world as also fallen, a balance that we find in Wesley’s own theological vision. Wesley argued for formation in holiness that defined the Methodist movement and that nurtured a “People called Methodist” who exercised care for their relationship with the world. But such commitment dissipated over time, embodied in an unmediated, unquestioned engagement of Methodists with the unbelieving world. For Wesley, a focus on the identity and agency of the world as well as on the crucial practices of formation in holiness constituted a way of being in the world that “leaned both ways at once.” While clearly called to the mission of spreading scriptural holiness, Methodists risked losing themselves in the engagement when not simultaneously attending to their need for formation and to the agency of principalities and powers.

Having lost this balance, contemporary Methodists tend to frame evangelistic mission according to the belief that that the world represents no challenge, no threat to the Church’s witness. Consequently, we find an understated emphasis on the significance of formation in relationship to accounts of evangelism. Turning to Wesley and his tradition on the subject of the world, we will rediscover the need for a further engagement

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<sup>3</sup> This is a quote often taken out of context. Addressing the concerns of those critical of his unconventional decision to engage in field preaching regardless of parish boundaries, Wesley said, “I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far, I mean, that in whatever part of it I am I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare, unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation.” *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* ed. John Telford (London, UK: Epworth Press, 1931), 1:286.

<sup>4</sup> See para. 120, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2008* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 87.

with the identity and agency of the principalities and powers for the development of evangelistic theology and practice. Without a robust account of the agency of the world as well as an account of the significance of formation, Methodist theologies of evangelism will fail to keep a balance that “leans both ways at once.”

Addressing this lack in contemporary Methodist theology, I turn next to a deeper articulation of the identity and agency of the principalities and powers of the fallen world. We will see that the powers of the world are both created, yet fallen. In this fallen state, I will argue, they function with a self-serving agency located in the formation of imagination, perception, and desire. To clarify the context and content of this formation, I will connect these reflections on the world to the work of David Yeago and Vincent Miller, who will help us to identify the market in late-modern North American life as a primary instantiation of the powers and principalities, and as a key example of their capacity to shape the imagination and inevitably, the ministry of the Church.

From here, I turn to consider the necessity of an account of formation for the possibility of shaping moral agency amid the competing powers. I begin with consideration of Miroslav Volf’s argument against an oversimplified understanding of the world, and I embrace his call for the development of a Christian “double vision” that underwrites Christian engagement with the non-Christian other. Yet, I will argue that Volf lacks an adequate account of the formation necessary for the development of such a vision. Instead, we will find the roots for such an account in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, who will identify the necessity of both formation for moral action and the specific context, or milieu, where such formation takes place.

After this clarification, I will turn to consider the ways in which this account of the agency of the world and the necessity of formation impacts the topic of this study: a theology and practice of evangelism. In this section, I will recall and then extend the argument from Chapter 1 that some theologies of evangelism show tendencies to understate the theological differentiation of Church and world. In this chapter, I will show that those who understate the Church-world difference often neglect the formative impact of the world *inside* the Church (reflecting Wesley's concern for the People called Methodist), and in that neglect, fail to offer an account of ecclesial formation as crucial to the evangelistic engagement with that fallen-yet-redeemed world. I will show that ultimately, such a position suffers, because it lacks an adequate account of the formative agency of the principalities and the powers and, consequently, an account of ecclesial formation as crucial to a theology of evangelism.

A properly Methodist theology of evangelism will seek a balanced vision of the world that understands the necessity and the danger of evangelistic mission within a creation that is simultaneously fallen, disobedient, and yet, yearning for redemptive fulfillment. Thus, I will conclude with some reflections on the relationship between formation and evangelistic mission in recent Methodist evangelism, and will suggest that without a robust account of the agency of the world within the Church-world distinction, theologies of evangelism will fail to keep a balance that "leans both ways at once" between identity and intelligibility, between ecclesial formation and evangelistic mission.

## 2.2 Wesleyan/Methodist Reflections on the World

In this first section, I will engage aspects of the Wesleyan and Methodist historical and theological tradition, to show that Wesley established a balanced account of the world, acknowledging both its goodness as creation and the lingering effects it suffers from the fall. While we might say that Wesley's account "leaned both ways at once," Methodist theological tradition after Wesley has struggled to retain such a balance. I will argue that in contemporary Methodist theological tradition, an overly positive vision of the world reigns, leaning only one way—rightly emphasizing the goodness of creation, but at the expense of a truthful account of its fallenness.

From inside the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions, the status of the world may appear obvious: "I look upon the whole world as my parish," Wesley said.<sup>5</sup> As Dana Robert and Douglas Tzan note, this phrase of Wesley's is often deployed "as the quintessential statement of Methodism's identity as a mission movement," underwriting a wide variety of missional expressions, ranging from international missionary work, evangelistic outreach, and social service.<sup>6</sup> It is often conjured as a source that informs congregational mission in the United Methodist Church, called "to make disciples of Jesus Christ...for the transformation of the world."<sup>7</sup> As Robert and Tzan sum it up, "Born as a movement to reform the church and to spread 'scriptural holiness' across the land, the tradition of Methodism is to move outwards into the world with a message of free

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<sup>5</sup> *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, 1:286. To reiterate, as Robert and Tzan rightly note, in Wesley's original context, he wrote "these defiant words in response to being denied use of a pulpit on grounds that he violated church order. He consequently moved into the fields where he could reach those who lacked a church home." Dana Robert and Douglas Tzan, "Traditions and Transitions in Mission Thought," *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, eds. William Abraham and James Kirby (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 431.

<sup>6</sup> Robert and Tzan, *Traditions and Transitions*, 431.

<sup>7</sup> *The Book of Discipline*, 2008, para. 120.

grace and social concern.”<sup>8</sup> By these lights, the world has a relatively uncontroversial status: it is where Methodists are sent to teach, to serve, and to proclaim the gospel.

But the question we pursue here is not only one of missiology, but of theology: what is the theological identity and agency of the world for Methodists? In theological perspective, the world is first and foremost the Creation, the good work of the Creator who spoke into being all that is, and called it good. As Randy Maddox points out, John Wesley clearly shared this commitment, defended the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and affirmed that if God is the source of all, then creation must be endowed with an original goodness (of course, prior to the introduction of sin).<sup>9</sup> Wesley also affirmed that the God who created is also the God who sustains the creation, the loving parent who offers an unending, providential order and loving care to all things.<sup>10</sup> In more Wesleyan terms, this providence is expressed as divine grace and is offered universally to the whole creation. Of course, this outlook had particular significance for Wesley’s theological anthropology; as Maddox notes, “Wesley’s most fundamental conviction about human life was that we are created dependent beings. Our very existence and all of our faculties are gifts of God’s grace.”<sup>11</sup> Wesleyans believe in the goodness of the work of a graceful Creator.

While it is important to keep this commitment to the goodness of creation in sight, it is also the case that Wesley offered a robust account of the fall and of the crucial doctrine of original sin. Again, as Maddox notes, Wesley “rarely passed up an opportunity to affirm the universal problem of human sinfulness. He considered any

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<sup>8</sup> Roberts and Tzan, *Traditions and Transitions*, 433.

<sup>9</sup> Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 59.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

denial of this reality to be both contrary to general experience and a fundamental rejection of Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> This sinfulness, however, was not just an issue located within his theological anthropology; indeed, not only humans, but all of creation has fallen. In humanity’s disobedience to its Creator, Wesley posits effects not limited to the interiority of the human heart, but throughout all creation. Wesley makes this clear in his sermon, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” noting that when humans oppose God, “a whole army of evils, totally new, totally unknown till then, broke in upon rebel man, and all other creatures, and overspread the face of the earth.”<sup>13</sup> The echo of the fall sounds throughout the creation.

Yet, as Theodore Runyon rightly notes, for Wesley, “God does not abandon this creature to the consequences of disobedience.”<sup>14</sup> While Wesley’s great concern was to articulate a *via salutis* that described the work of grace in the justification and sanctification of human lives, it becomes evident, particularly in his later years, that Wesley also showed concern for the redemption of all creation, human and non-human, from its fallen state.<sup>15</sup> Rather than placing eschatological hope only in a heavenly world to come, Wesley shifts his concern to the renewal of this material world. In turn, this shift influences Wesley’s understanding of the mission of the Church. Yet, here we get ahead of ourselves. The concern here is to note a balance in Wesleyan theological

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>13</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 56, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” quoted in Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Runyon, *The New Creation*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> This shift is particularly evident in Wesley’s later sermons, where as Maddox notes, Wesley expresses distinctly postmillennial eschatological commitments. Thus, “his focus of redemptive expectation increasingly shifted from a transcendent Heaven to a future New Creation,” appearing in an “eschatological vision of spreading the Reign of God in individual lives, social structures, and creation at large.” See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 240-242.

perspective concerning the state of the world. In short, the world is created, and thus, the world is good. At the same time, just as the creation has fallen into sin, so too has the world, created but fallen and waiting for its full redemption. With this balance in place, the question can next be asked: how shall the Methodists live “in, but not of” the world? The commitments entailed by confronting these questions influenced Wesley’s guidance for the People called Methodist.

In two sermons, both developed and published late in his life, Wesley clearly and strongly asserted that Methodist Christians must seek some separation from the world (clearly understood to be non-Christian people) who would threaten their growing faith. In the first of these two sermons, “In What Sense we are to Leave the World,” Wesley writes,

There can be no profitable ‘fellowship’ between the righteous and the unrighteous; as there can be no ‘communion’ between light and darkness...As Christ can have no ‘concord’ with Belial, so a believer in him can have no concord with an unbeliever...<sup>16</sup>

Wesley then clarifies why this is the case, describing the differentiation of Church and world behind this warning:

They are subjects not only of two separate, but of two opposite kingdoms. They act upon quite different principles: they aim at different ends. It will necessarily follow that frequently, if not always, they will walk in different paths.<sup>17</sup>

What is remarkable about this assertion is not only Wesley’s strong warning, but also the vision of the world upon which it is based, a vision that shows concern for the world (and for those within it) as both the creation of God and yet, also corrupted in the fall.

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<sup>16</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 81, “In What Sense we are to Leave the World,” §8, in *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 146.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



Still, this delineation of the two Kingdoms and the stern warning he offers cannot be overstated; Wesley still believed that Methodists must engage the unbelieving other. In the later sermon, “On Friendship with the World,” Wesley clarifies that those “of the world” are still deserving of Christian concern. “We may,” Wesley says, “we ought to love them as ourselves (for they also are included in the word ‘neighbour’),” which is meant to fulfill the basic requirement of the second greatest commandment.<sup>18</sup> But Wesley says much more than this. In relationship to those who are in the world, Wesley preaches that Methodists are called “to bear them real goodwill; to desire their happiness as sincerely as we desire the happiness of our own souls...”<sup>19</sup> This statement seems surprising. Given the stark description of the “two separate” and “opposite kingdoms” in the first sermon, why would Wesley encourage the Methodists to practice this kind of friendship with the world?

The answer is that Wesley continues to make room, even in a sermon warning Methodists about the dangers of the world, for an account of the world’s created goodness. This is a goodness established in the original creative act, but not limited there, as the work of God in Christ is an expression of saving grace for all creation. He writes,

yea, we are in a sense to honour them [non-Christians who constitute the world] (seeing that we are directed by the Apostle to ‘honour all men’) as the creatures of God; nay, as immortal spirits who are capable of knowing, of loving, and of enjoying him to all eternity. We are to honour them as redeemed by his blood who ‘tasted death for every man.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 80, “On Friendship with the World,” §8, in *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 130.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, §8, 3: 130-31.

Such theological commitments have ethical and specifically evangelical ramifications. Methodists are called “to speak to them on all occasions in the most kind and obliging manner we can,” and “to do to them all the good that is in our power, all they are willing to receive from us,” as a means to follow the example “of the universal Friend, our Father which is in heaven.”<sup>21</sup> Created by God, initially pardoned through the work of God in Christ, and empowered in the prevenient graceful work of the Holy Spirit, those who inhabit the unfaithful world are loved by God. Christian Methodists are called to echo that divine love for the world.

Still, as strong as Wesley’s description of the goodness of the world may be in these sermons, his warnings about the world dominate, and this is because of Wesley’s sense of the danger that those in the world pose to the sustenance of Methodist faith and life. While Wesley holds the created goodness of the world in one hand, he clearly holds the doctrine of original sin and the fall in the other. But what is significant about Wesley’s treatment of this issue is the nuanced way in which he conceives of the danger the world poses. He understands that Christian friendship with the world will not “immediately lead us into any outward sin.”<sup>22</sup> Wesley’s concern is not with the changes this friendship will render in discrete acts or overt choices, but rather, he draws attention to the more subtle ways a Christian perspective will suffer. More specifically, within Wesley’s understanding of human moral development, what others call his “moral psychology,” engagement with the world constitutes a counter-formation to the journey Christians make toward perfection. A brief consideration of the structure of his moral

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., §8, 3: 131.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, “In What Sense we are to Leave the World,” §9, 3:146.

psychology will be required for us to understand fully Wesley's warning to Methodists concerning their engagement with the world.

For Wesley, salvation amounted to much more than ensuring a personal experience of saving grace for each individual within the Methodist movement. As Randy Maddox argues, salvation for Wesley was much more than just "deliverance from hell, or going to heaven."<sup>23</sup> Salvation for Wesley was "restoration of the soul" or "renewal" of the image of God in holiness, a condition which assumes the formation of holy tempers.<sup>24</sup> This assumption draws Wesley's moral psychology into the conversation. Wesley's "moral psychology" articulated the role of the "affections" and "tempers" to inform an account of human moral action, as opposed to rival theories that emphasized the central importance of reason's capacity to subdue emotion for the development of right action.<sup>25</sup> Where the affections, for Wesley, addressed the "motivating dispositions," the tempers reflected the "enduring or *habitual* disposition of a person."<sup>26</sup> Taken together, "the capacity for affections is part of the Image of God" in the person, and "the proper enduring orientation of these affections would constitute the Christian tempers (or inward holiness) which is the Likeness of God."<sup>27</sup> However, because the corruption of sin affects the affections and tempers, salvation must address this need for renewal and re-formation. It does this via justifying and sanctifying grace, communicated in the instituted and prudential means through which believers are

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<sup>23</sup> John Wesley, *A Farther Appeal to Mean of Reason and Religion, Pt. I*, §3, *Works* 11:106., quoted by Randy Maddox, "Wesley's Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church," *Quarterly Review* 23 (2003): 18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

nurtured on their journey toward having “the mind of Christ.” As Maddox puts it, “if present salvation is ultimately expressed in holy living, it is grounded in the transformation of our distorted unholy tempers into holy tempers.”<sup>28</sup> The means of this formation are located in the Church, and even more particularly, for Maddox, in the practices of “social grace” therein.<sup>29</sup> This “social grace,” however cannot be solely located in the Church’s practices as a “sect” or as a “catholic” body; both are necessary, and thus, Maddox highlights Methodism’s embodiment of “dimensions” of this social grace: ecclesial unification of liturgical and sacramental practices, small group disciplines for mutual support and accountability, and “works of mercy” through which the Church is made present in the world.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Maddox shows us how Wesley offers an account of the relationship between the formation of holy affections and tempers and the practices of the Church as they mediate social grace. For Wesley, “Spirit and Discipline make a Christian.”<sup>31</sup>

Given this background, we can turn to the shape of Wesley’s warning in these two sermons concerning the relationship of Christians to the world, and we can see that Wesley understands the world to offer a sort of counter-formation to the development of holy affections and tempers. Again, Wesley is clear that friendship with the world will not immediately cause sinful behavior in the Methodist, but this does not mean that the world is no less a dangerous influence, inasmuch as the world will “by imperceptible

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<sup>28</sup> Maddox, “Wesley’s Prescription for Making Disciples,” 18.

<sup>29</sup> Randy Maddox, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” in *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu*, ed. Tim Macquiban (Oxford, UK: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 131-160.

<sup>30</sup> Maddox, “Social Grace,” 133-135.

<sup>31</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” §7, in *Sermons IV*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 4 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 90.

degrees, make you less heavenly minded.”<sup>32</sup> But in both sermons, Wesley also uses language that leads to the conclusion that engagement with the world “directly tends to corrupt the heart,” which is to say, it negatively impacts the formation of holy tempers and affections.<sup>33</sup> He goes on to describe the danger that friendship with the world entails:

It tends to create in us all that pride and self-sufficiency, all that fretfulness and resentment, yea, every irregular passion and wrong disposition which are indulged...it gently leads...into habitual self-indulgence... It draws [us] back into the love of the world, into foolish and hurtful desires...<sup>34</sup>

And this love of the world supplants holy tempers with “every other evil passion and temper of which the human soul is capable...”<sup>35</sup> In fact, in both sermons, Wesley likens the negative influence of the world on the Methodist Christian to the transmission of disease, literally, the “distemper” that imperceptibly, yet effectively, takes root in the body and spirit.<sup>36</sup>

The alarm that Wesley sounds in these sermons is striking, but in the end, it does not preclude engagements between Methodists and the world that are necessary. “It would not suffice,” Wesley writes, “to turn recluses, to shut ourselves up in monasteries or nunneries,” because for the most practical reasons, at a minimum, “we must have some intercourse with ungodly men in order to procure the necessaries of life.”<sup>37</sup> However, beyond this, Wesley also suggests that the engagements with the world are also motivated by what we might call evangelistic concern. Wesley suggests that “it is indeed with a good design, and from a real desire of promoting the glory of God, that many

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<sup>32</sup> Wesley, “In What Sense we are to Leave the World,” §16, in *Works*, 3:149.

<sup>33</sup> Wesley, “On Friendship with the World,” §16, in *Works*, 3:134.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Wesley, “In What Sense we are to Leave the World,” §12, in *Works*, 3:147-8.

<sup>36</sup> See Wesley, “On Friendship with the World,” §17, in *Works*, 3:134-5 and Wesley, “In What Sense we are to Leave the World,” §15, in *Works*, 3:149.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, §4, 145.

[Methodists] admit of familiar conversation with men that know not God.”<sup>38</sup> While the term does not appear in Wesley’s text, the motive he describes is clearly evangelism: “You have a hope of awakening them out of sleep, and persuading them to seek the things that make for their peace.”<sup>39</sup> Again, here we see Wesley drawing from his confidence in God’s grace for all creation that works for the pardon and healing of all, including the restoration of all holy tempers. Methodists are called into the world not only because they must engage the world for the sake of business, but also for the sake of evangelistic mission.

Yet, Wesley clearly places this invitation alongside his warning that in this engagement much is at stake, “for if you do not raise their hearts up to heaven, they will draw yours down to earth.”<sup>40</sup> Dwelling with those formed not in holy tempers and affections, Wesley warns, is a great risk, for “by this means more than any other, yea, than by all others put together, are the people called Methodists likely to lose their strength and become like other men.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, much of the work Wesley does in these sermons is to articulate the conditions of these engagements pertaining to relationships with others in business, within families, and even in the context of marriage. While some of these admonitions would appear to be somewhat severe today, they communicate the depth of concern Wesley felt for the influence of the world on the People called Methodist. He ends the later sermon with this warning:

Hear this, all ye that are called Methodists. However importuned or tempted thereto, have no friendship with the world. Look round and see the melancholy

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., §19, 151.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., §19, in *Works*, 3:151.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

effects it has produced among your brethren!...O ‘come out from among them,’  
from all unholy men... ‘and be ye separate!’<sup>42</sup>

In other words, while the engagement with the world is unquestionably necessary, it is an engagement that must be carefully considered and cautiously managed.

What should be clear at this point is that a Wesleyan understanding of the world must “lean both ways at once.” At the same time, this very stance also defines Methodist relationship to and with the world in evangelistic mission. This is to say that Wesley encouraged Methodists to acknowledge the simultaneous goodness and sinfulness that characterizes the creation, and in turn, to maintain simultaneously a faithful distance from and a missional engagement with it.

But, remembering the appraisal of Wesleyan theological tendencies in the previous chapter, this balance has proven difficult to maintain. As evangelical Methodists allow sin to become a feature endemic to the inner or spiritual life of the individual, and as liberal Methodists emphasize the created goodness of the world, both contribute to a loss of a balanced Wesleyan vision of the world as always both created good and fallen. Consequently, both also contribute to the development of an evangelism that fails to “lean both ways at once.”

In his lectures on “Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit,” Albert Outler briefly considers the First and Second Great Awakenings, finding in the former an “evangelism rooted largely in terror” and in the latter, an evangelism focused only on salvation understood reductively as “deliverance from sin and guilt (hellfire and damnation).”<sup>43</sup>

Recalling again from the previous chapter our consideration of Outler, we can remember

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<sup>42</sup> Wesley, “On Friendship with the World,” §28, in *Works*, 3:140.

<sup>43</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, (Nashville, TN: Tidings, 1971), 60-61.

that he is critical of the overly developed focus within these revival movements (particularly the second) on justification without sanctification, on personal experiences of conversion from sin at the expense of any concern for the Church and its sacraments.<sup>44</sup> As sin remains a deeply individual concern and not a feature of social structures, evangelism pursues the supposed locus of the problem: the heart of each person. Further development of this point would lead us to consider the division of fundamentalists and modernists, and as we shall see later in this chapter, to consider the development of modernity itself that creates the conditions for a reduction of sin to the inner, spiritual life of the individual person. Suffice it to say here that one element of this failure to balance a Wesleyan perspective is the failure to see sin as a condition that describes not only individuals, but indeed, the state of the creation.

At the same time, however, we can also point to those in the Methodist tradition who have failed to lean both ways because of their movement in another direction, namely, towards emphasizing the goodness of creation at the expense of an adequate consideration of its fallen state. In fact, it is this tendency that appears with more frequency in modern Methodist theology, and that leads to an understated view of the agency of the world as problematic for a theology of mission and evangelism. For instance, we can consider some of the reading of the tradition in John Cobb's work to develop a "Wesleyan theology for today" in his book, *Grace and Responsibility*.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 64-5.

<sup>45</sup> John Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).



In speaking of the creation, Cobb draws from an oft-quoted section of the third sermon in Wesley's series, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount," to show Wesley's deep concern for the goodness of God's creation. Wesley writes,

God is in all things, and... we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature;...we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical Atheism; but with a true magnificence of thought, survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of His hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the Soul of the universe.<sup>46</sup>

While Cobb is surely right about Wesley's commitment to the goodness of the creation as the work of the Creator, this is not the only point Cobb wants to affirm in Wesley's theological appraisal. Reading Wesley through a Whiteheadian panentheistic lens, Cobb sees a statement of God's immanence, extended not only to humanity, but to the whole creation. For Cobb, "Wesley's God, the Soul of the world," is closely identified with the creation, a God who "pervades and actuates the whole of creation, and who enlivens, enlightens, and liberates all people, calling them to strive toward personal and social perfection, and empowering their efforts..."<sup>47</sup> For Cobb, this is an affirmation in Wesley not only that "God is in all things," but even more, that "all things are in God."<sup>48</sup> While he is clear that Wesley does not unpack the significance of this theological position, Cobb

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<sup>46</sup> John Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse III," quoted in Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility*, 50. Interestingly, Howard Snyder, a theologian also firmly located in the Wesleyan tradition but not necessarily in the lines of thought associated with Cobb's work, draws the exact same quote from Wesley's sermon to suggest the presence of God's "wisdom" in creation. However, this leads Snyder to a Christological reading that is quite different from Cobb's panentheistic reading. Snyder writes, "Wesley affirmed that what God had created, preserves, and cares for is being redeemed through Jesus Christ who God has 'appointed heir of all things' (Heb. 1:2)." See Howard Snyder, "The World Through a Wesleyan Lens," in *Yes in Christ: Wesleyan Reflections on Gospel, Mission, and Culture* (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2011), 25.

<sup>47</sup> Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility*, 51.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

gestures toward such an account, suggesting that a commitment to God's presence in all creation requires an ethics in kind. Acknowledging God's literal presence in a human neighbor, or to go further, in animals, means that "what one does to one's neighbor one does to God also," or to put it another way, "through service of neighbor...one serves God."<sup>49</sup>

Setting aside Cobb's panentheistic identification of God within the world, this is an important reflection on a clearly Wesleyan teaching concerning creation; God is the Creator, God loves the good creation, and this vision of the world should affect the way Christians live, not only in relationship with each other, but in relationship to all creation. Such concerns are not new for Cobb, who has long been a significant voice naming and addressing the need to offer Christian theological reflection on the modern environmental crisis.<sup>50</sup> What I want to note is the relative absence in Cobb's account of the state of creation after the fall, and more particularly, the ways in which Wesley reflects concern simultaneously for the goodness and the fallenness of creation. While Cobb's connections between process and Wesleyan/Methodist theology lead to interesting and ecologically sensitive readings of the Christian tradition, they inevitably fail to truly "lean both ways at once."

Cobb's tendency to read the world in such positive light is an ongoing sign of the lack of balance in a Wesleyan and Methodist theology of creation that finds its origins earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In an article considering the relationship between Methodism

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> In truth, this has been a significant part of nearly all of Cobb's work over the course of his career. John B. Cobb, *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (Beverly Hills, CA: Benziger, Bruce & Glencoe, 1972), and *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology, and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), provide just two examples.

and culture, David Bebbington follows the 19<sup>th</sup> century “rise of respectability” or *embourgeoisement* in English and American Methodism, connecting it to an increasing comfort with Romanticist philosophical influences in theology and an overly positive view of the world.<sup>51</sup> Such moves make possible the urging of Robert Newton Flew in 1918 to contemporary British Methodist preachers to see “a vision of God affirming the world as good, as delighting in the colour and gaiety and many-sidedness of human life, ceaselessly operative as in Nature so among men...and strengthening all impulses after the pure and true and beautiful.”<sup>52</sup> In short, in Bebbington’s words, “much of the denominational leadership on both sides of the Atlantic in the twentieth century possessed a world-view that was as Romantic as it was Methodist.”<sup>53</sup> While these changes led to Methodist involvement in “remarkable cultural achievements catering for a mass market,” the question here is whether such achievements came at the expense of a Methodist vision of the world, and consequently, a vision of evangelistic mission that leans both ways at once.<sup>54</sup>

The significance of this question should press Methodists to seek a fully balanced view of the world as both created and fallen. To bring this conversation back to the missiological concern that started it, we see what may be at risk when the world is viewed in entirely positive terms (as the good creation) or in entirely negative terms (as

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<sup>51</sup> David Bebbington, “Methodism and Culture,” *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, eds. William Abraham and James Kirby (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 722.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Newton Flew, quoted by Bebbington, “Methodism and Culture,” 723.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 724. Focusing on the influence of this philosophical movement on the American Methodist theologian, Borden Parker Bowne, Bebbington argues that Bowne and his students (nine of whom, Bebbington notes, were serving as Bishops in the Methodist Episcopal Church [North] in the 1920’s) helped to usher in an unprecedented openness to culture among Methodists.

<sup>54</sup> Bebbington cites examples of early twentieth-century Methodist writers, visual artists, architectural achievements, and the rise of gospel music. See Bebbington, “Methodism and Culture,” 724-25.

the sinful, fallen world). This theological imbalance affects Methodist theology and practice of mission and evangelism, leading to the problematic under- and overstatement of the Church-world difference I have tried to name as present in contemporary works. Going forward, I will argue that in order to strike this balance more effectively, a deeper study and appreciation of the world as both good *and* fallen will be required. Thus, in the following section, I will develop our understanding of the world, and more particularly, the agency particular to the world of principalities and powers. Reflecting Wesley's concern for the formative power of the world on the people called Methodist, this consideration of the world's agency will be crucial. In turn, this examination will allow us to consider problems in the understated and overstated accounts of the Church-world distinction in theologies of evangelism, and in the end, to make a recommendation for the irreplaceable relationship between formation and evangelism for a Methodist theology and practice that "leans both ways at once."

### **2.3 The Principalities and the Powers**

Limited space precludes a lengthy description of the New Testament's understanding of the world as the realm of principalities and powers, much less an exhaustive discussion of contemporary theologians' differing interpretations of that understanding. Given the focus of this chapter, primary attention will be given to the issue of the agency attributed to the world of principalities and powers, and to their capacity to shape imagination and, in turn, perception.

There are, however, a set of commitments common to many accounts of the powers, and we can briefly share them here. In short, the biblical witness affirms that the

powers are created by God, and as such, are given a vocation within creation that God called “good.”<sup>55</sup> This is to say that the powers serve a calling and are given an agency to mediate God’s creative work to make and to sustain the Creation through the provision of “regularity, system, [and] order.”<sup>56</sup> While authors may differ over how closely we can map the principalities and powers on to material forms of social life, and over the relationship of the spiritual and the material in such a map, we can simply suggest here, with Charles Campbell, that “the structures and institutions of the world—political, economic, social—including the spirit or driving force that animates them, are part of God’s *good* creation.”<sup>57</sup> These powers, embodied in institutions and systems, are necessary, “they are essential to the social character of our life together, and we cannot live without them.”<sup>58</sup> Again, from the perspective of their agency, the principalities and powers originally served a divine vocation: to echo the parental, providential care of the Father that sustained the creation.<sup>59</sup>

This “echoing function” came to an end in the Fall. While created and while deemed good by their Creator, the powers’ “echoing function” was brought to an end in the Fall.<sup>60</sup> New Testament discussions of the principalities and powers describe how they abandoned their vocation to “enable humanity to live a genuinely free, loving life,”

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<sup>55</sup> See Colossians 1:15-17: “He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (NRSV)

<sup>56</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 141.

<sup>57</sup> Campbell, *Word Before the Powers*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Hendrik Berkhof makes this connection when he suggests that the powers “are the linkage between God’s love and visible human experience. They are to hold life together, preserving it within God’s love, serving as aids to bind men in His fellowship; intermediaries, not as barriers but as bonds between God and man.” See Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962), 29.

<sup>60</sup> Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 141.

and instead, now seek to take God's place within the creation, establishing themselves as worthy of human worship and service.<sup>61</sup> As Yoder says, "these structures which were supposed to be our servants have become our masters and our guardians."<sup>62</sup> Campbell sums it up nicely when he says, in short, "the powers have become demonic."<sup>63</sup>

This transformation contributes significantly to the human experience of the disorder within creation, as the powers seek their own survival and success, competing with one another for domination and, in turn, allowing the world to seem as if "all hell has broken loose."<sup>64</sup> As Stringfellow describes them, the principalities and powers are "legion," inasmuch as they constitute much of what humans experience as life in the world. In his prophetic, polemical style, he offers readers an extensive set of examples. The principalities and powers include...

...all institutions, all ideologies, all images, all movements, all causes, all corporations, all bureaucracies, all traditions, all methods and routines, all conglomerates, all races, all nations, all idols. Thus, the Pentagon or the Ford Motor Company or Harvard University...or the Diners Club or the Olympics or the Methodist Church or the Teamsters Union are all principalities. So are capitalism, Maoism, humanism, Mormonism, astrology, the Puritan work ethic, science and scientism, white supremacy, patriotism, plus many, many more—sports, sex, any profession or discipline, technology, money, the family—beyond any prospect of full enumeration.<sup>65</sup>

However, while Stringfellow is hard-pressed to speak positively about any of these, we cannot say that all organizations, institutions, and systems are completely demonic. They are, however, like all principalities and powers, living between the now and the not yet,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>63</sup> Campbell, *Word Before the Powers*, 25.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Word, 1973, Eugene: OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 78. Citations refer to Wipf and Stock edition.

always both created and fallen, called by God yet still sinful, and finally on the way to complete redemption. At a minimal level, God continues to rely on the powers to fulfill a conserving function within creation, establishing a basic order necessary for the continuation of life. At the same time, the principalities and powers, like individuals, must find themselves along the *via salutis*, repentantly turning away from the temptation to serve gods other than God, and increasingly embodying the holiness of heart and life revealed in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This situation does not, however, minimize the difficulty of navigating life amid these many principalities and powers. In these circumstances Campbell notes, “it is no wonder people feel pulled in so many directions, almost torn apart by the powers’ competing, often contradictory calls for loyalty and service.”<sup>66</sup> The result of this confusion is the sustained experience of “conflict and chaos” in the world.<sup>67</sup> But how do the powers achieve this result? This is to ask, what agency do they possess, what work do they do? With these authors, I argue that the fallen principalities and powers exercise a formative agency within Creation, shaping the imagination and perception of the world in ways that drive the world to serve the selfish interests of the powers for survival.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Campbell, *Word Before the Powers*, 25-26.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 26. Campbell quotes Stringfellow on this issue as well. Stringfellow writes, “[People] are veritably besieged, on all sides, at every moment simultaneously by these claims and strivings of the various powers, each seeking to dominate, usurp, or take a person’s time, attention, abilities, effort; each grasping at life itself; each demanding idolatrous service and loyalty.” And, anticipating the argument in this chapter for the crucial formation necessary to see, to name, and to resist these powers, Stringfellow goes on to note that “in such a tumult it becomes very difficult for a human being even to identify the idols which would possess him [or her].” See Campbell, 13, and Stringfellow, *Ethic for Christians*, 90.

<sup>68</sup> A fuller account would have to complicate the portrayal here to name and exemplify powers and principalities in the world that serve their divine vocation faithfully, or more explicitly, who struggle more with the calling to turn from serving death to serving the God of life. In other words, some powers and principalities, some organizations and institutions are holier than others. That this is the case allows, for example, Karl Barth’s location of instructive examples of faithfulness outside of the Church in the world, in

Stringfellow names several “stratagems” employed by the fallen powers for this formative purpose, and these are refined further by Campbell for an intra-ecclesial audience of preachers.<sup>69</sup> To shape people into servants, the disobedient powers employ negative sanctions, rewards and promises, isolation and division, demoralization and diversion, public rituals (to underwrite the division of dominant and subordinate relationships), surveillance (not only by the state but also by marketers, as described below), and secrecy. Most significant is Campbell’s consideration of the sinful powers’ trivialization of images and language, remaking symbols and “inverting” language in order to obscure truth. “In the place of truthful speech,” Campbell argues, “we encounter the propaganda of the state, the exaggerations of Madison Avenue, the doublespeak of politicians and advertisers, the false claims of expertise by bureaucrats, the code language of racism, and the diversions of the entertainment industry.”<sup>70</sup>

The use of language and image in these ways has a formative effect, Campbell argues, shaping human imagination in a particular way, which in turn affects our actions, because “how we see the world shapes how we live in it.”<sup>71</sup> More directly stated, this formation consists of an attempt to keep human imagination and perception functioning in an unconscious fashion, anesthetizing our ability to realize that things are not as they should be. Stringfellow articulates this “goal” most effectively when he suggests that the powers seek the “immobilization or surrender or destruction of the mind” and the

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the secular parables. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (New York: NY: T&T Clark International, 2007), 114-124.

<sup>69</sup> See Stringfellow, *Ethic for Christians*, Chapter 4, and Campbell, *Word Before the Powers*, 33-43.

<sup>70</sup> Campbell, *Word Before the Powers*, 40. Of course, Campbell could also point to the ways the Church itself as a fallen power is also sometimes guilty of such stratagems.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



“neutralization or abandonment or demoralization of the conscience,” both of which result in the death of any rational perception or moral action. Through the various means they employ, the powers function to shape the ways in which we both see and describe the world.

#### **2.4 The World’s Agency in Action: Contemporary Formation by the Principalities and Powers**

Wesley’s concern for Methodists was that the engagement with the world would lead to “distemper,” or a malformed set of affections and tempers that would undermine the integrity of a holy life. If we are called to the holiness of heart and life that reflects the proper formation of affections and tempers, and if we can agree with Stringfellow (as we saw in the previous section) that the principalities and powers of the world function with an agency that resists Christian identity and action and that truly serves not God but rather death, then we must seek a deeper understanding of the ways in which this agency is embodied among us. In short, in the effort to construct a Methodist theology of evangelism, we must articulate the counter-formation to holiness, the agency of the world’s principalities and powers that would invite Methodists to serve an evangelistic mission other than the one shaped inside the *missio Dei*.

In addressing this issue, I will turn in this section to two contemporary authors who can thicken our understanding of the times in which we live, and of the formative agency of the world, the principalities and powers, at work among us. In an article written at the end of the twentieth century, “Messiah’s People: The Culture of the Church

in the Midst of the Nations,”<sup>72</sup> David Yeago offers a reflection on the state of the Church in relationship to the world as revealed during the development of modernity. In that reflection, he offers us a lens through which we are able to see the imagination-shaping work of the powers. More specifically, Yeago draws our attention to the shaping power of the late-capitalist market in North American cultures. Vincent Miller will sharpen this analysis through his work, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*.<sup>73</sup> Miller’s analysis further clarifies the formative influence of the powers and principalities located in the contemporary market and in the consumer culture that serves it. Together, they will show us in greater detail the “imaginary” that the market in a fallen world creates and that pervasively and even unconsciously operates to distort human perception and action, exercising within the Church the constant temptation to serve the market through a focus on the individual shaped by late-modern consumer culture. Indeed, what I hope we shall see through the contributions of Yeago and Miller is the deep, almost imperceptible pull toward a tendency to limit our theological-practical imagination and consequent discussion of a theology of evangelism by a concern for relevance, legitimacy, and success, instead of by a concern for faithfulness.

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<sup>72</sup> David Yeago, “Messiah’s People: The Culture of the Church in the Midst of the Nations,” *Pro Ecclesia*, VI, 146-171.

<sup>73</sup> Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2005).

## 2.5 David Yeago and Vincent Miller: The Powers of Modernity and Market

In his article, Yeago begins with a historical account, noting that the eventual fusion of the divided Church(es) with various nation-states in the post-reformation period created the environment that led to the European wars of religion. In turn, these years of “misery” fueled the development of the Enlightenment and the creation of a rationality, which became known as ‘secular,’ distinct from that which was offered by the “sacred” traditions. Religious descriptions were supplanted by the supposed discovery of what Yeago calls a “more basic ‘secular’ account which was always there underneath.”<sup>74</sup> Further, these descriptions were not considered to be equal, yet differing accounts of reality, or simply rival traditions offering different perspectives on the same phenomena; rather, Yeago argues, the sacred was the “varnish” on reality that could be “scraped off” to discover the more fundamental, secular, or natural, truth. So described, this more basic account of truth as natural represented an “understanding of reality we all have in common, transcending all our divisive particularities, including religious ones.”<sup>75</sup>

With this development, the stage was set for further distinguishing the sacred and the secular within this emerging modernity as their split was mapped onto the corresponding differentiation between the “public” and the “private.” In this “modern settlement,” the secular is rendered as outward public reality, while the sacred traditions are relegated to the interior world of the private individual or sect. Thus banished from an existence that could be considered “outside of” or “different from” that larger public, secular reality, the Church was consequently reduced to being a “private ‘voluntary

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<sup>74</sup> Yeago, “Messiah’s People,” 147.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

association' of like-minded individuals *within* a public order governed by secular rationality."<sup>76</sup> As such, the Church is then set in a perpetual struggle to discover its purpose, its "reason for being," within the boundaries of that secular space, and thus, is also subject to defining those aims in light of the "projects and aspirations of that larger order."<sup>77</sup> This perpetual struggle for purpose has been described by Reinhard Hütter as the Church's "ceaseless crisis of legitimation."<sup>78</sup>

So, in other words, with the acceptance of the relationship of "public" and "secular" in modernity, the Church was allowed to occupy the space that was left over: the private sector, where the Church can be a voluntary association of individuals involved in religion, much as the Rotary Club is a voluntary association of individuals involved in business. However, Yeago goes further, arguing that in this modern settlement, the Church as a voluntary association of individuals involved in religion had to define the shape of that involvement in ways that could remain intelligible within that larger secular order. To put it another way, the Church will make sense in modernity only if and just to the extent that it has a function that somehow serves the secular order. "Thus," Yeago writes,

...the problem of the Church's mission is defined as the problem of the *relevance* of the ideas and values, the message, or the religious experience which the Church conveys to the particular larger culture of which the Church is a part. What role could these ideas, this message, this experience play within this culture? How could they be 'meaningful' in this cultural setting? What

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Yeago argues that in the modern settlement, the Church is not "allowed" to be what he calls "a distinctive public community in its own right, the present civic assembly of the eschatological city, constituting a new public order which occupies its own public space in the midst of the nations." See Yeago, "Messiah's People," 148.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

legitimate place could they find there? What function could they fulfill in the life of the surrounding culture?<sup>79</sup>

Usually, Yeago argues, this means that the Church “figures only as the vehicle for something essentially disembodied and non-public: a set of beliefs and values, an abstract ‘message,’ an inward religious experience”<sup>80</sup> and not a public, visible community that constitutes a different way of living in the world, but not being “of the world.”

Thus, in that search to be “relevant,” the modern Church then most often turns to one of the two forms of recognized “public life” in liberal societies—the state or the market. If they turn to the state, the Churches tend to take on relevance in relationship to the social and political projects also being pursued in the context of the state. “That is, the Church can seek a reason for being by associating itself with one or another of the parties and movements which seek to influence the state and get its monopoly of coercive power behind their own agendas.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, “the Church legitimates itself by taking on the socially recognized role of a motivational support-system for socio-political struggle.”<sup>82</sup>

However, in turning to the market, the Church accepts the role of becoming another “provider of goods and services to consumers” without realizing that the market is “governed by the principle of subjective value: goods and services have whatever value consumers choose, for whatever reason, to place upon them. This means that legitimacy in the culture of the market is identical with market share.”<sup>83</sup> Under these conditions,

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

Yeago argues, the Church cannot but determine its legitimacy based on the measure of “consumer response,” and more specifically on the percentage of the total “religion-market” that it can attract and serve.<sup>84</sup>

I would argue that it is this latter formation within the dominant market that has most influenced contemporary theology and practice of evangelism, and that it is most evident among those who I suggest tend to understate the importance of the Church-world relationship. Yet, we can say more here, to be more explicit about the relationship between the identity and agency of the powers in the contemporary market and the ways in which this relationship influences the identity and the agency of the Church, and more specifically, the theology and practice of evangelism in the Church. To expand that description and to make those connections more explicitly, I turn now to the work of Vincent Miller, in his book, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*.<sup>85</sup> Miller’s analysis further clarifies the formative influence of the powers and principalities located in the contemporary market and the consumer culture that serves it.

In his book, Miller offers us an account of the rise of capitalism and the transformation in life it brought to the U.S. in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With the advent of the “Fordist” Era, social reality began to change concomitantly with the shift from production to consumption in the national economy. In this economic reality, the decline of the self-sustaining household made room for the development of the single-family home, which, Miller argues, represented “a milestone in the shunting of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>85</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*.

the need for social standing into consumption in a way that ensures the endless perpetuation of consumer desire.”<sup>86</sup> The emergence of the single-family home allowed society to reduce its commitment to the multi-generational family in lieu of a narrow focus upon the maintenance of the nuclear family. The nuclear family sought an autonomous lifestyle, increasingly insulated from extended family and other social connections, and was sustained by the security of wages (rather than the support of the extended family and community) and by new technologies that sustained a household for the smaller family unit. Miller points out that this shift to an increasingly isolated existence fueled by consumption represented one of the thickest roots beneath what would sprout as the modern woes of advanced capitalism and consumer culture: individualism, materialism, and the decreasing capacity to care well for one another.<sup>87</sup> Part of this care, of course, includes the formative role elder generations offer to younger generations, which is mitigated as generations in the extended family are separated from one another by the move to the nuclear family. As Miller puts it, this shift created a norm wherein “each generation is freer to make its own choices regarding cultural and religious practices from the options they encounter. These choices of culture are increasingly drawn from commercial offerings as consumption becomes a means of establishing and expressing identity.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>87</sup> Miller writes, “The individualism and materialism rightly condemned by papal encyclicals, ethicists, and cultural critics have their foundation in the very material social structure of the single-family home.” And thus, being isolated from the neighborhood, the community, and even the welfare of others in the world, the “geography of the single family home makes it very likely that we will care more about the feeding of our pets than about the millions of children who go to bed hungry around us.” Ibid., 51.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 53.

This effect intensifies over the course of the twentieth century, as the alienation of the single-family home was exacerbated in the Post-Fordist Era, beginning in the 1970s. In this period of economic instability, facing diminishing returns from mass-market production, advanced capitalism shifted into new strategies to sustain the cycle of production and consumption vital to the ongoing functionality of the economic system. While some of these strategies involved changes to the systems of labor and production, my interest is in the developments made to increase consumption. The primary strategy serving this end was the development of the niche market. Flexibility in production methods allowed the development of specialized products for particular groups of people, identified by the growing capacity of information technology to make finer distinctions of desires within varying demographics.<sup>89</sup> This specialization had an even more fragmentary effect upon society. While the move to the single-family home created the socially isolated nuclear family, the development of targeted niche marketing carried that disintegration even further, considering each member of the nuclear family a viable consumer to whom marketing could be directed. Further individualized, each member of the nuclear family was empowered to make consumptive choices as an individual, for him/herself. These choices were made apart from consideration of the needs of others,

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<sup>89</sup> As an example of this development, Miller offers the story of the H.J. Heinz Company that in the Fordist era built its reputation in the mustard market with its signature square-faceted jar and familiar label and logo: it sold its singular product on the basis of its reputation. In the Post-Fordist era, however, Heinz began to develop new kinds of mustard, most notably Grey Poupon, which fed a market of young professionals (Yuppies) seeking a more gourmet experience not offered by the plain yellow mustard they ate while growing up. Miller quotes a subject from another study on post-Fordist capitalism: “All I want is a place where I can buy twelve kinds of mustard.” See Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 67-8.



separated not just from those in the extended family or in the wider community (local and global), but even from those “others” who live under the same roof.<sup>90</sup>

While this narrative explains the rise of a nation of consumers, Miller also displays how such a consumer culture effects the appropriation and practice of religious traditions. The market excels at developing different products, commodities especially shaped for each niche in order to maximize the potential for sales and profits. In that environment, the market will take anything and everything that it can in order to package it and offer it as a “new” product to the consumptive public, meaning that almost no line is drawn around that which cannot be subjected to commodification and consumption, including of course, all forms of culture, religious and otherwise. In fact, “...the most profound challenge of consumerism,” as Miller puts it “[is] the commodification of culture—the reduction of religious beliefs, symbols, and values to objects of consumption.”<sup>91</sup> Such beliefs, symbols, values, and practices, Miller explains,

are abstracted from their conditions of production, presented as objects valuable in themselves, shorn of their interrelations with the other symbols, beliefs, and practices that determine their meaning, and function in their traditional contexts. Unmoored from these contexts, their ‘semantic mass’ is greatly reduced. Cultural commodities become more susceptible to manipulation and misappropriation, free-floating signifiers that can be put to uses unrelated, indeed contradictory, to the meanings they bear.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, individuals inside and outside of the Christian tradition are able to purchase a crucifix, either because it is an item of devotion and prayer, or because they agree with the popular musical artist Madonna, who once said, “Crucifixes are sexy.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 79.

The point here is to note how even these religious symbols, beliefs, and practices are subject to the very commodification that allows for their purchase by individuals in the consumer culture. Being so formed by the powers, these individuals become the focus for the deliberation of congregations that seek the legitimacy found in consumer popularity, which is, as Yeago reminds us, the highest measure of contemporary cultural relevance.

Because this is the story within which we find ourselves, Miller suggests that theology and theological reflection on ecclesial practices must take these realities into account. As he puts it, “theology must consider the systems that present elements of tradition in a commodified fashion and the formation of believers’ interpretive habits that incline them to engage tradition as a commodity.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Miller suggests that, for these very reasons, even interaction within our religious traditions is a dangerous task. This is so because, due to the pervasive nature of the market’s formation of consumer culture, we, too, will be subject to the same tendency to commodify aspects of our own tradition. It will even be a temptation for us to take such traditional symbols, beliefs, and practices and to abstract them, to reify them, and to place them in service to a goal that seems worthy to us and good for the numerical growth of the Church. Yet, all of this may be perpetuating the problem to which Yeago points, namely, the continuing eclipse of the Church in the acceptance of the modern settlement, the Church serving the market by seeking relevance which is actually catering to the individual shopper.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 66.

These developments Miller describes, as seen within Yeago's larger narrative, and within our consideration of the identity and agency of the world of principalities and powers, give more texture to the situation in which we find ourselves as Christians. We come to see in greater detail the imaginary that pervasively and even unconsciously operates in ways that distort our perception and our actions, exercising within the Church the constant temptation to serve the market through a focus on the individual shaped by late-modern consumer culture. Indeed, what I hope we see through the contributions of Yeago and Miller is the deep, almost imperceptible pull to keep us from limiting our theological-practical imagination and consequent discussion of a theology of evangelism to a market-based concern for relevance, legitimacy, and success, instead of guiding that imagination and discussion by means of a concern for faithfulness.

## **2.6 The Necessity of Formation for the Engagement with the World**

Given the agency of the powers embodied in the modern market, and given the ways in which they exercise a formative agency among Christians and non-Christians alike, we must next turn to the question: how is the Church formed to be a People in the world capable of seeing, naming, and resisting the powers? This is a dangerous question to ask in relationship to a conversation seeking the proper differentiation of Church and world, inasmuch as it seems to suggest the need for separable space within the world, constituting a sort of antiseptic vantage point from which the Church can point and name the powers that are "out there."

For Miroslav Volf, there is reason to be resistant to descriptions of the world that avoid the reality of its existence as a "network" defined by "small and large refusals,

diverges, subversions...” as well as “acceptance, affirmation, and laudation of many cultural givens.”<sup>95</sup> In his article, “Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter,” Miroslav Volf seeks to “...explore the nature of Christian communal presence in contemporary societies and the character of Christian identity and difference.”<sup>96</sup> Volf engages 1 Peter to display not only the nature of the difference between the Church and the world (hence the adjective, “soft”) but also to argue that the “world does not seem a monolithic place in 1 Peter.”<sup>97</sup> Consequently, the relationship between Christians and non-Christians cannot be simply displayed as one of “insiders” versus “outsiders.” As a result, Volf suggests that prior attempts to thematize the relationship of Church and world in H. Richard Niebuhr and Troeltsch’s work must be problematized and complicated.

Volf notes that the “soft difference” that describes the mode of the Church’s missionary engagement is not properly understood as a “method,” but rather, is “the missionary side of following in the footsteps of the crucified Messiah. It is not an optional extra, but part and parcel of Christian identity itself.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, the mode of mission, the mode of engagement, is not the identification of a tertiary language with which the faith can be “translated” in order to be more relevant, and it is not a strategy that can be employed by the Church as a tool. Instead, it is best understood as a function

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<sup>95</sup> Miroslav Volf, “‘It is Like Yeast’: How the Gospel Should Relate to Culture,” *Theology News and Notes* [a publication of Fuller Theological Seminary] (October, 1994): 12-15, quoted by Craig Dykstra, “Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination,” *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 58, n. 19.

<sup>96</sup> Miroslav Volf, “Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter,” *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 16.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

of the Church's internal order and practice, of the Church being itself—which Volf gets to by speaking of how such mission flows from the “identity” of the Church.

This Christian difference, however, does not render the Church and the world incommensurable bodies without means for meaningful communication. Again, drawing from 1 Peter, Volf argues that the text displays experiences of both commensurability and incommensurability between these first-century Christians and the surrounding culture, experiences that even occur almost simultaneously. How could this be the case? To explain, Volf pushes his readers to eschew a “black-and-white” understanding of the world, in order to make room for a more complicated picture of the social reality of the time.

In short, Volf argues that in 1 Peter, “the world consists of a plurality of ‘worlds,’” each marked by a “mixture of partly self-consistent and partly disparate practices and thought patterns.”<sup>99</sup> Further, these worlds are in constant contact with each other, and are thus always already engaged in the push and pull over practices and values that constantly move across the range of acceptability and rejectability among each of the social worlds. Such description has significant effect on any conversation about the distinction of the Church and the world, and any account of the mission of the Church as well, because, as Volf argues, “in such a world, one cannot speak either of the principled commensurability or of the principled incommensurability of value systems.”<sup>100</sup> Consequently, this ambiguity seriously destabilizes any effort to overstate the differentiation of Church and world, inasmuch as in a world defined by such plurality,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

“there is no single proper way for Christians to relate to a given culture as a whole.” Instead, Volf argues, “there are numerous ways of accepting, rejecting, subverting, or transforming various aspects of a culture which is itself a complex pattern of symbols, beliefs, values, practices and organizations that are partly congruent with one another and partly contradictory.”<sup>101</sup> Any embodied account of Christian engagement with the social world that seeks to avoid abstraction will require such a complicated account, not only of the complexity of the plural world(s), but consequently, of the variety of the Church’s responses to it.

Volf paints a similar picture in his book, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, when considering the nature of conflicts over issues of justice. He engages with Alasdair MacIntyre’s conception of rival traditions and grants that such an understanding of discursive traditions can lead to resolution of common conflicts. However, Volf asks, “what are the odds that [such conflicts] *will* be resolved?”<sup>102</sup> Because of the low potential for rival traditions to meaningfully resolve conflicts (outside of the presence of a figure, like Aquinas, who has the capacity to navigate between traditions in the development of new tradition), there is an inherently problematic quality to MacIntyre’s offering: Volf, following Stout, suggests that MacIntyre shows “*excessive interest in coherence and comprehensiveness*” in his consideration of traditions, which leads to an inherently agonistic relationship between rival traditions, seeking to retain their particularity while seeking to engage and convert

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>102</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 206. Emphasis in original.

the other.<sup>103</sup> In fact, while such a sense of coherent and comprehensive tradition might seem inviting in a context of rival traditions and ongoing ethical conflicts, Volf argues with Zygmunt Bauman that “*no such home is imaginable* in contemporary societies.”<sup>104</sup> A “single coherent tradition” is only accessible when one belongs to a “single unified community,” and therefore, such an option is not widely available or viable for most in the modern West.

This realization leads Volf to suggest a mode of engagement between Christians and the world. Volf argues, “I think it better to give up on ‘coherent traditions’ and, armed with basic Christian commitments, enter boldly the ever changing world of modern cultures.”<sup>105</sup> Volf goes on,

...I have argued that a Christian theologian will not necessarily want to get rid of the ‘hybridity’ [of our traditions]—she will be much more interested in affirming *basic Christian commitments in culturally situated ways* than in forging coherent traditions and she will suspect that hybrid traditions will be more open than coherent traditions not only to be shaped by these commitments but also to be enriched by each other.<sup>106</sup>

His understanding of this enrichment is captured in what he calls “double vision,” referring to the capacity to engage one’s own tradition—what Volf has named as “basic Christian commitments”—and what Hannah Arendt calls an “enlarged way of thinking” that takes into account the perspectives, voices, and experiences of others as a way to both understand the other and to more deeply understand one’s self and one’s own

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 207, emphasis in original.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 209, emphasis in original.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 211, emphasis in original.

tradition.<sup>107</sup> For Volf, to be a Christian in a world defined by hybridity, plurality, and multiple, overlapping “worlds” requires no less.

There are aspects of this enrichment through engagement with the other that sound very much like a “leaning both ways,” as I seek to articulate in this project. Yet, the effort to root this enrichment within the theological distinction of Church and world may lead to the concern Volf articulates. In other words, the commitment to the Church-world distinction and the commitment to the mutual enrichment through engagement with the other may seem to be contradictory commitments. While Volf seeks to underwrite the mutually transformative character of an engagement with the other, his critique of MacIntyre suggests that the possibility of such an engagement may be threatened by the assertion of the Church-world distinction.

However, I am suggesting the need for an account that leans both ways at once, that takes seriously both the theological distinction of Church and world and, at the same time, the mutual enrichment that comes through engagement with the other. I believe this is a Wesleyan position, as well, as a Methodist theology of evangelism will seek a balanced vision of the world that understands the necessity and the danger of evangelistic mission within a creation that is simultaneously fallen, disobedient, and yet, yearning for redemption.

Thus, while we continue to assert both the theological distinction of Church and world, and in particular, the differing agencies of the two realities, in order to develop an account of Methodist evangelism, it is certainly not the case that these distinctions terms are meant to oversimplify or deny the complexity of either Church or world. While

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



recognizing the value of Volf's suggestions, then, we must pose further questions about them.

Is it possible to envision the engagement between the Christian tradition, or perhaps more helpfully, a Christian congregation, with its environment, with the various constitutions of "other" or "world" in a given context, without there being in place a vital sense of, perhaps even an "excessive interest" in, the coherent and comprehensive vision of the Christian life? I think Volf's account raises three key questions along this line.

First, while Volf presses MacIntyre (and presumably, any account that relies on his work) to complicate the picture of the world, does it not stand to reason that this demand goes some distance in articulating the danger of the formative agency at work in the principalities and the powers? Volf is right: there is not one version of a monolithic power called "the market" against which Christians are called to resist. This inevitably complicates the picture of the modern market we have seen in Yeago and Miller's work. However, taking up Volf's complicated vision of the world, can we not see that the presence of market power is a component of multiple contexts, institutions, states, and organizations? While there may be room for an account of market power serving a faithful purpose within Creation, Yeago and Miller's work clarifies the agency of the impact of fallen, disobedient market power on the identity and agency of the Church in the world. If this assumption is right, it only confirms the complexity of the world's agency that shapes our moral identity and imagination. This affirmation leads to the second question.

Given the complexity of the reality that we refer to as the “world,” and given the need, as Volf argues, for Christians to engage the world “armed” with basic Christian commitments, we must ask what constitutes such commitments and whether the argument over what constitutes “basic Christian commitments” is itself an account potentially participating in the development of a “coherent and comprehensive” tradition.<sup>108</sup> Despite Volf’s questioning the possibility of such coherent tradition, we must wonder whether placement within something approximating a tradition like that described by MacIntyre is necessary here.

Of course, to ask about the constitution of such basic Christian commitments begs the question of their origin. And if this is the case, then we also must ask, third, how Volf thinks of formation. He argues that Christians need to engage the world “armed” with these basic Christian commitments. But where do such commitments come from? This is not only to ask from what tradition they are derived (reflecting the question above), but also to ask in what practices and activities they are communicated. How are these commitments formed in the lives of Christians?

I argue that these questions suggest the possibility that Volf underplays the normativity of the Christian tradition both in the formation of such “basic Christian commitments” as well as in their operation outside the Church in the complexity of the plural, hybrid world. So, while we appreciate Volf’s naming of the issue (life is hybrid and messy; the negotiation between the normativity of Christian tradition and context is not a simple transaction, nor should it be only one of agonistic striving and eventual vindication), in the end, a concern for formation continues to appear crucial to a

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 210.

theological ethic and evangelistic mission that “leans both ways at once” between Church and world.

I believe we can move toward such an account of moral formation by turning from Volf back to Alasdair MacIntyre. Specifically, MacIntyre will help show the importance of an account of formation within community as crucial to both the possibility of moral agency and, in the terms employed here, moral formation for the sake of resistance to the agency of principalities and powers. Such intra-ecclesial formation will be crucial to the development of a Methodist theology of evangelistic mission.

In “The Intelligibility of Action,” MacIntyre argues that “an essential part of learning to act” is the learning how “to behave in such a way that others construe our actions as intelligible.”<sup>109</sup> Outside this concern, human actions become unintelligible, perhaps appearing random or even beyond reason; MacIntyre suggests that if this happens, “we are in danger of being treated literally as idiots.”<sup>110</sup> To avoid this outcome, an intelligible act requires an account of its location within a “social context” with “social relationships which inform practices and enacted narratives.”<sup>111</sup> In other words, what constitutes an agent’s act as intelligible is the location of that action within a narrative set of circumstances, or its participation in a larger narrative of actions that precede and, presumably, follow, rendering each particular action intelligible as part of this sequence.

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<sup>109</sup> Alastair MacIntyre, “The Intelligibility of Action,” in *Rationality, Relativism, and the Human Sciences*, eds. Joseph Margolis, Michael Krausz, and Richard M. Burian (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: M. Nijhoff, 1986), 64.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 66.

“To learn to act,” MacIntyre writes, “is one and the same as learning to participate in such sequences.”<sup>112</sup>

More concretely, participation in such a sequence assumes location not only within a generic social context, but more specifically, within social institutions that have established practices. For most contexts, MacIntyre points out, intelligible action is action that takes place as part of the “established routines...in a particular social group” that make up the “structure of the normal day.”<sup>113</sup> For example, when meals are eaten and what constitutes the “work week” and the “weekend” each shape, in their own ways, what constitutes this sort of “normal.”

While MacIntyre does not use this language, I want to push further to see the ways in which the principalities and the powers are agents of formation in the creation of this very understanding of what constitutes “normal.” As a result, we will be able to see how these agents develop actions understood to be intelligible or unintelligible in such a context. To do this, however, I will turn to another piece of MacIntyre’s, namely, his article, “Social Structures and their Threats to Moral Agency.”<sup>114</sup> Recall that, for MacIntyre, an act is intelligible when located within a narrative sequence of actions, and more specifically, when shaped as such by relationship to social institutions and practices. In this article, he continues his exploration of intelligible acts by considering whether moral agents can be impeded by the locations in which these acts occur. He

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>114</sup> Alastair MacIntyre, “Social Structures and their Threat to Moral Agency,” in *Ethics and Politics, Selected Essays, Volume 2* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 186-204.

asks, “are there or might there be types of social structure that would prevent those who inhabited them from understanding themselves as moral agents?”<sup>115</sup>

To answer this question, MacIntyre first unpacks what constitutes a moral agent, detailing the necessary capacity to “stand back from and reconsider...engagement with...established role-structures,” a capacity supported by the virtues of “integrity” and “constancy.”<sup>116</sup> Such virtues “set limits to flexibility of character” and ensure the pursuit of “the same goods through extended periods of time.”<sup>117</sup> The capacity nurtured by these virtues leads to the moral agent’s self-awareness and self-critical ability to resist being defined by the particular social roles and the consequent demands such roles may place on the agent. This model creates moral space significant for our consideration of the differentiated agencies attributed to Church and world. In MacIntyre’s words, moral agents

will...be inhabitants of not just one, but of two moral systems, that of the established social order with its assignment of roles and responsibilities and that developed within those milieus in which that assignment has been put to the question.<sup>118</sup>

Thus, the ability to be a moral agent is captured in the agent’s capacity to live within the necessary “tension” that exists when living amid these potentially conflicting, differentiated moral systems.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 192-193.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>119</sup> MacIntyre argues that the practical thinking necessary in such situations will always be “apt to generate...tension, tension that may develop into conflict between the requirements of the established social and moral order and the attitudes of those educated in those social settings that make the exercise of the powers of moral agency possible. So to be a moral agent is have the potentiality for living and acting in a state of tension or, if need be, conflict between two moral points of view.” He goes on to clarify that this is

In the context of this dissertation's concern, I ask: is it possible to see MacIntyre's vision of moral agency between differentiated social orders as descriptive of the life of Christians lived within the tension of Church and world? He MacIntyre does suggest that Church is one social setting (among many) that stands as the sort of milieu which encourages, and more importantly, shapes the capacity for the "practical thinking" necessary to navigate the "tensions" of moral life.<sup>120</sup> The more significant question for now, however, is to see how other "social structures" may serve as principalities and powers, effectively forming citizens of the world.

After establishing the requirements for moral agency, MacIntyre turns to address the question reflected in the title of the article: "Are there types of social structure that preclude the existence of such milieus [social settings which offer formation in self-understanding, critical discourse, and accountability to empower agents to navigate moral tensions between moral systems] so that the very possibility of the exercise of the powers of moral agency might be threatened?"<sup>121</sup> His answer leads to consideration of what he calls the modern problem of "compartmentalization," which

goes beyond that differentiation of roles and institutional structures that characterizes every social order...by the extent to which each distinct sphere of social activity comes to have its own role structure governed by its own specific norms in relative independence of other such spheres.<sup>122</sup>

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not an abstract reflection, but is, rather, always "a tension or conflict between socially embodied points of view, between modes of practice." MacIntyre, "Social Structures," 193.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 197.

While it is certainly the case that individuals move between roles, compartmentalization effectively results in the individual “dissolving” into each role, living within each with a different set of standards and practices. Why is this dissolution problematic?

MacIntyre argues that, when compartmentalization occurs, there is no “milieu” available to help see and sort these differentiated roles; there is no environment that will allow for the practice of moral discernment necessary to navigate the tensions created in the life lived among each and all systems. Again, these “milieus” are contexts of communal engagement, where the self-understanding of the moral agent is formed through critical discourse and is sustained through structures of accountability. To draw in terms from the first article, we might also say that these milieus are social contexts that offer narratives and practices that shape the intelligibility of action. In other words, they play a crucial function in sustaining moral agents. As MacIntyre puts it,

Such milieus would provide agents with what they otherwise lack, an understanding of themselves as having a substantive identity independent of their roles and as having responsibilities that do not derive from those roles, so overcoming divisions within the self imposed by compartmentalization and so setting the scene for types of conflict that compartmentalization effectively suppresses.<sup>123</sup>

In short, the milieus that nurture these capacities are crucial not only to the possibility of resisting compartmentalization, but also to the possibility of being a moral agent at all.

Without these milieus, abandoned to live within the structures defined by compartmentalization, the individual’s life is lived not as an agent, but rather, as a captive.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 199.

However, to say this is not to suggest that such an existence is simply given, or somehow “natural.” On the contrary, MacIntyre argues, “the divided self of a compartmentalized social order...has to have developed habits of mind that enable it not to attend to what it would have to recognize as its own incoherencies...”<sup>124</sup> While for MacIntyre’s purposes, this assertion suggests that the individual subject is not exonerated of responsibility for the moral failures that follow such a fragmented, compartmentalized life, this insight plays a different role in the argument in this chapter. Here, we see the significance of what amounts to another kind of formation at work among those living the compartmentalized life. Namely, this is a formation that shapes a “diminished agent,” who acts as a “co-conspirator” with others so compartmentalized, who are “engaged together in a conspiracy that functions so that they can lead blamelessly compliant lives...”<sup>125</sup> In essence, to reiterate the point already made, the diminished moral life shaped by compartmentalization is still a life shaped by the powers of formation inherent within each of the roles the individual plays, and is a life defined by a “lack of knowledge” and a “lack of control” which is the “inescapable outcome of the structuring of roles and responsibilities in a compartmentalized social order.”<sup>126</sup>

Can we connect MacIntyre’s account of the formative effect of compartmentalization with the account of the formative agency of the principalities and powers of the world? The capacity to be a moral agent and to engage in intelligible action is contingent upon seeing one’s acts as part of a narrative sequence, an ability which is itself only available through one’s location in the social context or milieu, where

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 202.



one is shaped by practice. This recognition not only underscores the necessity of the Church as a context or “milieu” where the formation of moral agents is crucial, but the necessity of an account of evangelistic mission as well. As opposed to those who argue for the Church’s aesthetic witness as constitutive of an account of evangelistic mission that does not violate the Church-world difference, we see here that more direct forms of engagement will be required in formulating such an account. This is the case because those shaped within compartmentalized social structures cannot help but see the acts of the Church in the world to be unintelligible, just to the extent that they cannot fit within the narrative sequences available that would render such acts intelligible.

While the Church would be, for MacIntyre, a “milieu” that offers the institution and practices necessary for the formation of moral agency, it cannot appear as such to the compartmentalized self. From the vantage point of a diminished moral agency, the compartmentalized individual can only see and describe the witness of the Church with the categories available from within the compartmentalized social structure that he or she inhabits at the time. In this light, it becomes understandable why Churches would seek relevance through appeals shaped for a community of consumers, and why contemporary corporations would seek to nurture “brand evangelists:” in MacIntyre’s terms, both appeals reflect compartmentalization within the social structure of the market, where everyone is reduced to the role of consumer. In Stringfellow’s terms, both appeals reflect the hegemony of the principalities and the powers, struggling for the loyalty of many in a self-serving effort to ensure their own survival and flourishing. In short, to those formed to see according to their location within the compartmentalization of the modern world,

the Church's witness will make no sense. For this reason, evangelistic mission must engage in the work of contextualization and even apologetic. Evangelism cannot be reduced to the word made verbal, but it also cannot only be defined as the word made visual.

## **2.7 The Impact of the World and the Call for Formation in a Methodist Theology of Evangelistic Mission**

Yeago and Miller have clarified the formative agency of the principalities and powers by focusing upon the particular context of the late-modern, North American/North Atlantic market. Volf has warned us against the overly simple understanding of the world, calling for an account of engagement with the other. But MacIntyre has underscored the crucial need for the Church as a milieu of moral formation for the sake of this evangelistic mission. Now we turn more explicitly to see how these moves affect the account developing here.

In this section, I will recall the argument from Chapter 1 that some theologies of evangelism tend to understatement of the theological differentiation of Church and world. However, given our engagement with the Methodist tradition; the lack of a balanced theology of creation that takes into account both the goodness and the fallenness of the world; and our further investigation into the agency of the world in that fallenness, embodied in the principalities and the powers and more specifically in the contemporary market; we are situated to say more explicitly what is problematic about the understatement present in contemporary theology of evangelism. Simply put, without a robust account of the agency of the world within the Church-world distinction, theologies

of evangelism will fail to keep a balance that “leans both ways at once” between Church and world, between ecclesial formation and evangelistic mission.

Those who understate the Church-world difference often neglect the formative impact of the world inside the Church (reflecting Wesley’s concern for the formation of a sanctified People called Methodist), and in that neglect, fail to offer an account of ecclesial formation as crucial to the evangelistic engagement with that fallen-yet-redeemed world. As proof of this neglect, I will turn to two authors who I argue show the tendency to understate the Church-world difference, albeit in different ways, yet with the same result. A lack of concern for the agency of the principalities and powers and a lack of concern for the formative practices of the ecclesial community both undermine the possibility of a theology of evangelism and lead to the potential fusion of Church and world. Recalling our consideration of his work in the previous chapter, George Hunter will serve as a key example of the former tendency, while the work of Priscilla Pope-Levison in evangelization and liberation theology will offer an example of the latter. Both helpfully push the Church to fulfill its calling to evangelistic mission in the world, but will also show us the places in which a developing Methodist theology of evangelism must say more.

## **2.8 Addressing Evangelistic Mission that Understates the Church-World Difference**

### **2.8.1 Revisiting Hunter**

We begin with some consideration of those who understate the differentiation of Church and world, mentioned in Chapter 1 but whose understatement now becomes clear in the tendency to neglect the agency of the world or to neglect the practices of the

Church in light of such agency. To turn briefly to the consideration of George Hunter's work in the theology and practice of evangelism in Chapter 1, I believe that the analyses offered by Stringfellow, Yoder, Campbell, Yeago, and Miller all point to the ways in which the world may influence the development of evangelistic mission. In Hunter's positing of "tradition" versus "mission," and in the recommendation of the "SLAM" method for the contextualization or inculturation of the Church's practices, there is little, if any, consideration of the ways in which adapting to "the style, the language, the aesthetics, and the music of the target population" may be capitulations to the powers and principalities active in the shaping of each.<sup>127</sup> While Hunter does suggest that "at a deeper level," the Church's seeking of an effective evangelistic outreach will have to engage the "core attitudes, beliefs, and values that provide the... 'worldview' through which the society views the world," there is no sign that what disciplines Hunter's concern is a view of that world in biblical terms, as the fallen, yet redeemed creation of powers and principalities.<sup>128</sup> On the contrary, Hunter places focus on the world as it is known and experienced by those outside the Church as the primary model for the adaptation of ecclesial practice. In this light, the world for Hunter functions as a neutral context, the field within which evangelism takes place, without concern for the agency at work therein. Yet, given Stringfellow, Yeago, and Miller, we are led to ask, how will the

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<sup>127</sup> As a reminder, Hunter writes, "At the surface level, an indigenous ministry strategy involves adapting to the style, the language, the aesthetics, and the music of the target population. (SLAM serves as a convenient acronym.) At a deeper level, indigenous ministry involves engaging the attitudes, beliefs, and values characteristic of the society, especially the core attitudes, beliefs, and values that provide the lens, or the 'worldview' through which the society views the world." George G. Hunter, III. *Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry and Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 33. Yet, when Hunter speaks of "the world," his concern is not the identity and agency of the world in biblical terms, as expressed in the work of Berkhof, Yoder, and Stringfellow.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

Church know whether the view of the “world” imported into the Church and used to shape the practices of evangelism, formation, and worship conforms to the way of Jesus or the disobedient principalities of the world? In other words, under these terms, how can the Church know which Lord it serves—the Lord Jesus or the lords of this world?

At this point, it should be said that it is important to acknowledge that the Church and its practices are always embodied in a local context, and thus, are subject to the necessary practice of contextualization and enculturation. While the tendency to understate the differentiation of Church and world in a theology of evangelism can lead to the unquestioned importation of the practices of a given context into the Church, it is not a question whether this engagement will have to take place; the Church is always located in a place, and whether for the sake of evangelism or formation or worship, will have to address the question of intelligibility in that place. Just to this extent, Hunter’s suggestions are well-taken, if not for their substance, then for their challenge: the Church is always given these questions to answer. Yet, the issue being raised here (and in this dissertation in general) is the need to attend to the terms of that engagement. While the recommendation is for a missional ecclesiology that posits the Church as always “leaning both ways” into its tradition and practices and into the world in reconciling mission, this ecclesiology can only be established through a robust consideration of the differing agencies of both Church and world. In these terms, the need to ask these questions concerning relevance and Hunter’s recommendations for adaptation within context are understandable, but do not go deep enough or far enough to offer a theology of evangelism that “leans both ways.” Unfortunately, without adequate consideration of the

agency of the world, Hunter offers a theology and practice of evangelism that leans just one way—into the world, without enough concern for the possibility that in that leaning, the Church can lose itself in the process.

### **2.8.2 Priscilla Pope-Levison**

Unfortunately, the opposite is also true: even with a strong theological reading of the agency of the world, evangelism lacking concern for ecclesiology and its constitutive practices of formation also leads to a problematic understatement of the Church-world differentiation. It is rare to find theologies of evangelism that offer such a reading of the world, but as one example, we can consider Priscilla Pope-Levison's study of the central role of evangelism in many twentieth-century Latin American liberation theologians, *Evangelization from a Liberation Perspective*.<sup>129</sup> Motivated by the desire to overcome the division between the Church's ministries of evangelism and social justice, Pope-Levison turns to liberation theology which offers a model of evangelization that "unifies these two opinions...It values proclamation, and it values work for justice in this world."<sup>130</sup> To some extent, this assertion comes as a surprise, inasmuch as most appraisals of liberation theologians would identify their primary concerns as the liberation of the poor from systems of political and economic oppression, and not evangelism per se. Yet, by placing these theologians in their broader Roman Catholic and Protestant contexts, and specifically in the late twentieth-century development of ecumenical and conciliar statements showing the increasing focus on and development of

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<sup>129</sup> Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Evangelization from a Liberation Perspective* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1991).

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

the theology and practice of evangelism,<sup>131</sup> Pope-Levison provides the backdrop necessary to notice within these Latin American theologians' work a common thread concerned with evangelization.

Because many of these theologians emphasize the intersection of theological reflection and political-economic liberation, they offer understandings of evangelism that reflect both a concern to reconnect proclamation and service to the neighbor, as well as a reading of the world as a realm that continues to live under the sway of the principalities and powers. In particular, Pope-Levison points out that Emilio Castro calls out in his work for an evangelization of both "persons and structures." These "structures," for Castro, are indeed the "principalities and powers" that include

the powers of the government, the powers of the syndicate, the powers of the large corporations, the powers that regulate the market relation, the powers that regulate the means of production...<sup>132</sup>

and that must, themselves, be evangelized. In fact, it is in the interest of this revolutionary liberation that evangelism of the structural powers must be sought, so that "through evangelization, these powers can be transformed to the benefit of the revolution."<sup>133</sup> In other words, through the conversion sought in the proclamation and practice of evangelism, more than individual salvation is at stake; in fact, the conversion

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<sup>131</sup> In addition to two documents specific to the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America, Pope-Levison draws attention to *Ad Gentes* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* as backdrop to her consideration of the Roman Catholic theologians in the study. Likewise, previous to her engagement with Protestant liberation theologians, Pope-Levison reviews the development of evangelism as a theme in World Council of Churches documents from New Delhi (1961) to Vancouver (1983). While I will not engage the development of this theme in the ecumenical literature, the World Council of Church's *Mission and Evangelism—An Ecumenical Affirmation* in 1982 served as a "convergence document," according to Paul Chilcote, drawing together evangelical and ecumenical theologians to confirm the crucial importance of both verbal proclamation and "solidarity with the victims of unjust social and economic systems..." See Paul Chilcote, "Evangelism in the Methodist Tradition" in *T & T Clark Companion to Methodism*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen Jr. (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 233-34.

<sup>132</sup> Emilio Castro, quoted by Pope-Levison, *Evangelization from a Liberation Perspective*, 124.

<sup>133</sup> Pope-Levison, *Evangelization from a Liberation Perspective*, 124.

of the powers and the principalities themselves is evangelism's proper goal, all in the service of revolution and liberation.

This focus informs Pope-Levison's recommendation for a method of evangelism in a liberationist frame. In an epilogue to her study, after considering the work of various liberation theologians, Pope-Levison offers what she calls a "wholistic" model for "evangelization from a liberation perspective" in four steps.<sup>134</sup> Step one is to begin with study of the context, with a particular eye to the "perspective of the marginalized."<sup>135</sup> This study is undertaken in order to answer the question, "what are the religious, economic, social, and political factors at play in the context of the marginalized?"<sup>136</sup> Step two follows this descriptive move, inviting a comparison of the context to "the vision of God's reign"<sup>137</sup>. In other words, this is a theological move, seeking to bring the contextual specificity of the marginalized's situation revealed in the first step into conversation with the vision of God's reign, and to notice the differences. She writes, "the important element is that God's reign is pro-world as opposed to other-world," and "therefore, God's reign is furthered by liberation through justice as well as by salvation through conversion."<sup>138</sup> The third step follows, inviting the identification of the "means of evangelization most likely to change the context."<sup>139</sup> Here she draws attention to four means that appear in the works of those considered: "proclamation, denunciation, the call to conversion, and action."<sup>140</sup> After the identification of the most effective means of

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.



evangelistic practice within a context, step four suggests the need to seek a “concerted community effort for evangelization.” Here, Pope-Levinson repeatedly makes clear that evangelization is not the work of individuals, but rather, is the work of an “evangelistic community” that brings together “the marginalized and those in solidarity with them” in the shared work of evangelization from a liberation perspective.<sup>141</sup>

Interestingly, Pope-Levinson’s work does reveal a frame within which a reading of the powers and principalities of the world is significant for an account of evangelism. From a liberation perspective, the agency of the powers is made visible in the political and economic systems that oppress the poor and marginalized. The agency of these powers is in no doubt, despite the fact that the powers are perhaps not so easily identified, enmeshed as they are with the political and economic forces that appear to be simply “the way things are.” Nonetheless, the results of this agency at work are manifest in the existence of the oppressed peoples of the world who cry for liberation.

Yet, there is a weakness to Pope-Levinson’s work in the terms of this study, which finds even her articulation of evangelism to reveal an understated differentiation of Church and world. Given her clear articulation of the powers, this weakness may not be obvious. Yet, the gap I find in Pope-Levinson’s study is not a lack of consideration of the ways in which these liberation theologians connect worldly oppression to the agency of powers and principalities, but rather, in her lack of attention paid to ecclesiology, and more specifically, to evangelism’s relationship to the practices of Christian formation. Because Pope-Levinson focuses upon the ways in which these authors articulate evangelization in liberation perspective, she tends to assume a shared set of commitments

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 171.

among them regarding what constitutes this evangelizing community. To the extent that many liberation theologians are influenced by examples of base communities, there are some bodies to which one can point in order to gain insight into the identity and practices of the community that enacts this liberation evangelization.<sup>142</sup> Yet, at least for Gustavo Gutierrez, the base community is not a replacement for the Church; he makes a differentiation between these two communities as agents in evangelism.<sup>143</sup> This leads me to ask, in the “evangelization in liberation perspective,” what is the Church?

This question should not detract from the importance of Pope-Levison’s work, however. The connection made by these theologians between the plight of the poor and oppressed and a reading of the powers and principalities of the world remains a powerful challenge to so-called “first world” reflection on theology and practice. Indeed, while not read as a liberation theologian, Stringfellow’s work was motivated by concerns no less grounded in his first-hand witness of the lives of the poor and oppressed in the United States. While we may want to see these connections more explicitly articulated, the importance of Pope-Levison’s work in this text is found in the connection she makes between these voices calling for liberation and the theology and practice of evangelism. It stands as a late twentieth-century step toward healing the nearly century-old breach between concerns for evangelism and social justice.

Even so, I have to conclude that Pope-Levinson’s work does not go far enough in offering us a theology of evangelism that “leans both ways,” and that it in fact tends to

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<sup>142</sup> In considering the work of Gustavo Gutierrez, Pope-Levison suggests that “these [base] communities occupy a priority position in the evangelistic process.” See Pope-Levison, *Evangelization from a Liberation Perspective*, 48.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

understate the differentiation of Church and world that I believe is so crucial. While Hunter errs by suggesting the Church find its evangelistic practice by freely borrowing from the context of the world, thus capitulating to the desires of the world shaped by the powers and principalities of the market, Pope-Levison offers a theology and practice of evangelism that suggests an unquestioned relationship between the Church and agents of the world seeking liberation. The question here is, on what terms can the Church evaluate and negotiate that relationship?

As we have seen, in her method of evangelism in liberation perspective, Pope-Levison makes a descriptive move primary. And she follows this recommendation with the explicit step of bringing such descriptions of context into conversation with theological commitments to the reign of God. Yet, if the powers of oppression are as significant as we trust they are, do we not need a stronger account of the ways in which the Church is both prepared for and engages in that contextual description and theological reflection? Why, for instance, is the evangelistic description of the world not disciplined and shaped by the traditioned ecclesial practice of discernment? In other words, what I seek from Pope-Levison in her account of evangelism is what I seek from Hunter: a more robust vision of the Church and its practices that make explicit that the evangelistic engagement with the world of powers and principalities is an engagement of the Church with the world. Captured in a question, perhaps I can simply ask: How does the Church engage the world of powers and principalities for the sake of seeking the liberation of the oppressed, without losing itself in the process?

As one example of this risk, I think it is telling that little attention is paid in Pope-Levison's book to the issue of violence as a potentially necessary means, according to some theologians, of rejecting oppression and seeking liberation. Pope-Levison quotes the liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, who writes about the work of evangelism in building the reign of God through

...the joining of prophetic denunciation and action as a mode of evangelization; the emphasis on the building of a world that resembles the kingdom of God; the stress on action in behalf of justice as the privileged, though not the only, form of love; the acceptance of the conflict to which this model of evangelization leads...<sup>144</sup>

Yet, there is little that follows in this account to suggest what practices would fill out this account of denunciation and action, an embrace of action for justice, and the acceptance of conflict. Perhaps it would be more significant to ask what practices would be renounced and rejected as unfaithful forms of each. It is possible that the issue of violence plays little or no role in the work of the theologians detailed in Pope-Levison's study, and thus, the absence of this issue in the book may be understandable under those terms. Still, we must ask what would keep us from imagining potential violent embodiments in the evangelistic practices of "annunciation" and "denunciation" that Pope-Levison offers in her evangelistic method. What forms Christians to make such distinctions and judgments?

Whereas the absence of consideration of the world's identity or agency leads Hunter's theology of evangelism to understate the Church-world difference, the lack of consideration of ecclesiology and of the Church's constitutive practices does the same in Pope-Levison's work in evangelism. Without articulating *both* the agency of the

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<sup>144</sup> Jon Sobrino, quoted by Pope-Levison, *Evangelization from a Liberation Perspective*, 85.

principalities and powers of the world *and* the agency of the Church in evangelistic witness, we cannot discover an evangelism that remains evangelism, as opposed to institutional membership recruitment, the pursuit to “corner” a religious market, or the formation of unquestioned alliances with powers and principalities for the sake of human liberation, “by any means necessary.” In each case, when the relation of Church and world is understated, the Church is invited to lean so far into the world that it falls in.

## **2.9 Conclusion: The Necessity of Formation for Evangelism**

On the way toward developing a Methodist theology of evangelism that takes seriously the differentiation of Church and world and, at the same time, seeks to “lean both ways at once,” I have argued that a theology of evangelism must be deeply connected to an account of Christian formation. Given the formative agency of the principalities and powers embodied in the late-modern market-state to shape the imagination and, in turn, the ministry of the Church, the practice of evangelism is often at risk of distortion. Specifically, I have sought to articulate this distortion as a temptation to understate the differentiation of Church and world, where the Church, in the desire to serve evangelistic mission in the world, loses itself along the way. In short, without a concern for formation, the particularity of the Church is too easily given up in favor of achieving relevance, or impact, or success in the world. Thus, in order to envision and enact evangelistic mission that is always “in” but not “of” the world, the need exists to keep a close connection between evangelistic mission and Christian formation. In short, an account of evangelism requires an account of formation in discipleship.

To Methodists, such a claim appears uncontroversial; as recounted in the first chapter, the reclamation of the proper relationship between evangelism and discipleship is the fruit of several influential theologies of evangelism developed in the past half-century. Recalling the discussion of Methodist theologies of evangelism from Chapter 1, particularly those from Outler, Abraham, and Jones, each author makes an argument to reestablish and to deepen the relationship between evangelism and discipleship. Such reestablishment was necessary given the decoupling of evangelism and discipleship in the Second Great Awakening, where the *telos* of evangelism was reduced to conversion. This aim is clear in Outler's reflections in *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, where he calls for the reestablishment of connection between evangelism and discipleship, conversion and formation, justification and sanctification. These concerns are carried forward in Abraham's work, and are developed more fully in Jones' argument in *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor*, which sees evangelism expressed within a "logic of discipleship."<sup>145</sup> Discipleship, rather than simply conversion, is the proper goal of evangelistic mission.

While I agree with the significance of the reconnection between evangelism and discipleship formation, I want both to affirm and to expand it. While it is crucial to link evangelism to the practices of discipleship and to affirm that these practices are most rightly located in the Church, it is not enough to say that evangelism's *telos* is not conversion, but discipleship. We must also go further, to say that a community of

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<sup>145</sup> Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 65-98.

discipleship is not just the *telos* of the practice of evangelism, but is also *antecedent* to the practice of evangelism. Such a claim leads to two conclusions.

First, this means that evangelism is a practice made intelligible by its location in the social structure of the Church. In MacIntyre's terms, there must be a "milieu" that offers moral agents in the world the place to find a community of critical engagement and accountability in resisting the compartmentalization of modern life. While the Church is an example of one of those contexts for MacIntyre, I see it as crucial for empowering the agency of Christians to navigate the world. More specifically, this formation in the context of the Church enables the possibility of naming and sustaining the tensions that come with the conscious existence between differing moral systems, or in the terms employed in this dissertation, between Church and world. As we have seen, without a concern for the context and the practices of formation, the potential for understating or overstating the Church-world difference in a theology of evangelism is great. To the extent that an account of formation is necessary to explain how Christians are enabled to see and to describe the world as the world, and thus, as the realm of the disobedient principalities and powers, formation is crucial to the possibility of a faithful practice of evangelism that "leans both ways at once" between Church and world.

Second, this claim for formation's role in an account of evangelism also means that evangelism is a practice not only associated with individuals, but should, rather, be considered a practice "of the Church," and will require an account of formation not only of Christian individuals, but of the Church itself. In short, I argue for an evangelism

performed not only or simply by people called Methodists, but by a “People called Methodist.”

That said, I will conclude by stating that a focus on the practices of formation in the life of the Church will beg another question that must be addressed in the development of a theology and practice of evangelism, and that will show us the way forward from here. Namely, if the Church is formed to be a People called Methodist, then into what mission is this People formed? In other words, what is the Church called not only “to be,” but also, “to do”? While Outler, Abraham, and Jones call the Methodist tradition to embody these practices of evangelism and discipleship so as to inhabit a vision of being the Church in the world, they differ with one another over issues of identity and agency to be granted to the Church. In the terms of this project, the question is, how does the Church “lean both ways,” into the practices of its tradition as well as into its evangelistic mission in the world? Thus, we will move from here to address such questions in the following chapter by considering the agency of the Church in a Methodist theology of evangelism.



## CHAPTER 3

*The Church is then not simply the bearer of the message of reconciliation, in the way a newspaper or a telephone company can bear any message with which it has been entrusted. Nor is the Church simply the result of a message, as an alumni association is the product of a school or the crowd in the theater is the product of the reputation of the film. That men and women are called together to a new social wholeness is itself the work of God, which gives meaning to history, from which both personal conversion (whereby individuals are called into this meaning) and missionary instrumentalities are derived<sup>1</sup>*

### 3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, we considered contemporary Methodist theologies of evangelism, suggesting a tendency to either overstatement or understatement of the Church-world difference. Some strongly suggest the Church's contextualization of all ecclesial practices for the sake of the gospel's relevance and intelligibility within local, non-Christian cultures (e.g., Hunter). Others point out the evangelistic qualities of the Church's own historic, traditional practices that offer an aesthetic witness to the gospel in the world (e.g., Stone). But this appraisal is complicated by the theological location of the Church-world differentiation not in ontology, which suggests a spatial separation of the two, but rather, in the agency, or the activity of the Church and the world. This differentiation led us in Chapter 2 to consider the agency of the world, particularly the principalities and the powers and their imagination-shaping formative work. We concluded that an account of evangelism must be joined to an account of ecclesial formation that is resistant to understating the Church-world difference.

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<sup>1</sup> John Howard Yoder, "A People in the World," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 74.

In the current chapter, we turn our attention to the other side of the differentiation. Now we consider the Church and, more particularly, the agency of the Church in evangelistic witness. I will begin by addressing a concern that some may raise after reading the argument in Chapter 2, namely, that the connection of formation and evangelism is problematic, as it may lead to an overstatement of the Church-world difference. To associate evangelism with formation, it could be argued, is to undercut the ways in which evangelism names an engagement with the unbelieving other and introduces an overstated distance between Church and world. Lacking a stronger account of engagement, the Church's evangelistic mission is constituted by what we have named as an "aesthetic" witness to the gospel, a visual display of the Church's holiness offered to the watching world. While such a position would avoid any tendency to understate the difference of Church and world through its emphasis on the formation of Christian identity, on its own it may constitute an overcorrection, leading to an overstatement of the Church-world difference. In other words, while the Church may ensure through an emphasis on formation that it is not necessarily "of the world," is it adequately considering how it is called to be "in the world"? In the commitment to formation, does the Church lose sight of its calling to evangelistic mission?

While this may be a risk among those I suggest tend to the overstatement of Church and world, I will argue that a Methodist evangelism will not only take the agency of the world seriously, but will also take the agency of the Church seriously, called to engage the world in evangelistic mission. In short, resisting the temptation to place too much emphasis on the Church's evangelistic witness as the offer of an inviting visual

display of holiness, this chapter argues for a more robust statement of the Church's agency in evangelistic witness. Or, in the form of a question, I ask, what is the agency of the Church's witness? And thus, what does it mean to say that the Church is simultaneously "in" but "not of" of the world?

This chapter will first articulate the need for such an account through an engagement with the Wesleyan relationship between ecclesiology and soteriological mission, suggesting that Methodist theology of evangelism requires a strong account of the Church's direct engagement with the world. Then, I will seek to develop such an account by drawing from an unlikely source, namely, the work of John Howard Yoder. Where many would place the accent in Yoder's work on the Church's passive, visible witness to the "watching world,"<sup>2</sup> I argue that Yoder actually suggests such an active, engaged stance vis-à-vis the world in evangelism. In other words, what I offer here is not simply a Yoderian challenge to Methodist ecclesial identity and practice, but just as much, a Methodist reading of a Yoderian theology of evangelistic mission. This reading will lead us to the following chapter, where I will suggest that ecclesiological identity and agency in these terms is not a strictly Anabaptist or Mennonite position, but instead, has deep resonance within the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition and can aid us in the project of articulating a Methodist theology of missional evangelism that "leans both ways" between Church and world.

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<sup>2</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001).

### **3.2 Are There Risks in Connecting Formation and Evangelistic Mission?**

The previous chapter asked the question, “What is the agency of the world?” and located that agency in the formative power of the principalities and powers to shape imagination and perception, the capacity to see and to describe the world. We saw this ability particularly in the influential power of the North American market, rendering individuals as consumers and pushing the Church to seek its legitimacy and relevance in relationship to this overarching definition of the world. For a developing theology of evangelism, this situation results in what I have called the understatement of the differentiation of the Church and the world, inasmuch as the Church unquestioningly shapes its evangelistic ministry by seeking relevance and legitimacy vis-à-vis the world. In response, I argued that for a Methodist theology of evangelism, we must assert the importance of the Church’s practices of formation in relationship to the Church’s practices of evangelistic mission.

Yet, at just this point, we must pause to consider a potential concern. It could be argued that encouragement to connect formation and evangelism is a mistake just to the extent that it leads to other problems in conceiving the relationship of Church and world, and which in turn short-circuits the account of the Church’s evangelistic mission in the world. Specifically, such a focus on intra-ecclesial formation may lead to the conclusion that the Church seeks a separable space from the world within which it can shape identity without any need to engage the other. Such would overstate the Church-world difference, and would also undermine an account of the Church’s engagement with the world in evangelistic mission.

As I suggested in Chapter 1, there are some who write in the theology and practice of mission and evangelism that represent such a tendency to overstatement. These authors tend to have a robust sense of the world's agency, and often also of the necessity of the Church's formative practices. However, I argue that this outlook sometimes translates into recommendations for evangelistic mission that emphasize Christian witness in terms of its visibility, and that thus constitute an aesthetic evangelism.<sup>3</sup> Rightly called to maintain a careful relationship with the world, the Church in this frame eschews the evangelistic practices that capitulate to the modern market, insisting, for instance, that evangelism is synonymous with congregational membership growth. Rather than seeking to shape an evangelistic mission strategized to meet the needs of a "target audience," this position suggests that "the most evangelistic thing the Church can do today is to be the Church..." emphasizing the evangelistic character of ecclesial life and practice.<sup>4</sup> While I deeply agree with the turn to the significance of ecclesial practices, and specifically of the importance of formation in relationship to evangelistic mission, the concern raised here asks whether such a position unnecessarily overstates the difference the Church must seek in relationship to the world. In other words, in the commitment to formation, does the Church lose sight of its calling to evangelistic mission?

In Chapter 1, I drew attention to Bryan Stone's work in *Evangelism After Christendom* as an example of the tendency that argues for the development of an

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<sup>3</sup> The authors I will consider below who tend toward this overstatement are Bryan Stone and Samuel Wells. Regarding the commitment to an "aesthetic" in evangelism see Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 267-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

evangelistic mission grounded in an aesthetic apologetics. In this school of thought, the life of this particular, counter-cultural community called the Church constitutes an evangelistic offer to the world. We can find another articulation of the crucial role formation plays in relationship to evangelistic mission in Samuel Wells's book, *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics*.<sup>5</sup>

Wells's study "locates the heart of ethics squarely in the practices of the local Church," considering the intersection of the Church's ethical action and its formation, particularly in worship.<sup>6</sup> Some of this action in the world is evangelism. For Wells, "Evangelism names a variety of practices by which the Church invites all people to worship God, to be his friends, and to eat with him."<sup>7</sup> However, he is careful not to equate "conversion" with "evangelism," understanding that evangelism is that mode of invitation that brings one into the orbit of the Church. Conversion comes later through forms of catechesis, including regular participation in worship and presumably other practices of the Church's shared life that eventually lead to Baptism, one's formal entrance into the Church. Drawn narrowly then, the elements that comprise evangelism for Wells include "all those conversations, events, communications, gestures, encounters through which a person comes to hear and receive that invitation made by God through the Church."<sup>8</sup> While such a general statement would invite a request for further clarification, Wells does not stop with this identification, and goes further to argue that these forms of evangelistic mission take two forms, "prophetic" and "priestly," while

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Wells, *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Wells, *God's Companions*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

avoiding a third, that being “kingly,” evangelism. Each of these treatments deserves some brief attention.

Wells argues that “prophetic evangelism” refers to all those activities “whose principal or entire purpose is to bring people face to face with God, especially when such people have forgotten or never known what it means to worship him, to be his friends, and eat with him.”<sup>9</sup> The primary way in which this takes place, according to Wells, is through the Church’s work of witness, understood to be a subtle, yet constant and visible presence of the Church in the world that is eventually noticed by the world exactly because of its presence and constancy. A further extension of this prophetic mode is found beyond evangelism as prophetic “witness” when it becomes prophetic “martyrdom.” While these terms are synonymous, Wells believes that it is helpful to suggest the role of martyr as an escalation of Christian witness-as-presence that more directly challenges the very order of things in the world, and thus, suggests a different and riskier set of consequences for the Christian evangelist; whereas evangelism in the mode of witness may result in inviting the world’s ridicule, evangelism as martyr may invite the world’s wrath.<sup>10</sup>

Prophetic evangelism is distinguished from Wells’s second type, “Priestly Evangelism.” Turning toward the witness of the internal life of the Church, priestly evangelism refers to “activity that falls appropriately within the common life of the Church, and is conducted for its own sake, but through which the grace of God may nonetheless touch a person and inspire them to discover more of the hope that is in the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 60.

hearts of Christians.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, if one is exposed to the inherent beauty found in the lives of Christians and in the shared life of the Christian community and comes to see it as both attractive and habitable, then perhaps this too can be a persuasive form of witness as one responds with the decision to enter the Catechumenate. This witness is not to be limited to the interior life of the Church, however, and thus, Wells offers a second mode of priestly evangelism understood as “humble” involvement outside the Church in the local community, the Church essentially being the Church in the neighborhood where it has been placed. The differentiation from prophetic evangelism seems to be the stance of the Church in relationship to the world: prophetic evangelism is an inherent challenge to the way of the world, while priestly evangelism is a mode of the Church’s grace-full presence in the world.<sup>12</sup>

Neither form of evangelism engages in an apologetic task of adapting the gospel or the Church’s practices to forms more familiar or relevant to the world. This form constitutes a key example of Wells’ third type of evangelism, taking on the “kingly” stance. Here, the Church takes the ends of evangelism into its own hands, controlling the shape of witness in order to exercise some control over the results. As Wells puts it, kingly evangelism “directs attention away from Christ” and toward the Church, and in this way, subverts the possibility of faithful witness.<sup>13</sup> As we have seen, while neglect of this issue leads some to push the Church into the world without any critical consideration of the mode of the Church’s presence in the world, Wells counsels restraint, seeking a way for the Church to be evangelistically present in the world without suffering the loss

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 62.



of its own identity in the process. Priestly and prophetic evangelism emerge out of the primary practices of the Church being the Church, through the life of a community that is a witness in the world.<sup>14</sup> As Wells sums it up, “In short, the Church is a prophet and priest that points to a king.”<sup>15</sup>

Wells’s work reflects care for the differentiation of Church and world, and holds a significant place for the ministry of formation in relationship to an account of evangelistic mission. Yet, to Wells, we pose the question of whether this position may actually function to undermine that evangelistic mission, just to the extent that his account may overstate the difference of the Church and the world. As suggested in Chapter 1, the issue here is the possibility that the Church’s missional relationship to the world is limited to the aesthetic witness of an alternative community that offers itself as an “example” or a “display” of holiness. But in the resistance to the kingly mode, is the Church pursuing an evangelistic mission that is denied the agency necessary for a strong account of the Church’s engagement with the world? More specifically, the complaint is that a focus on formation obviates a focus on evangelism, such that the accent of concern is placed on the shaping of the holy community, and not on the ways in which the Church directly engages the world in evangelistic mission.

For instance, Hunter might ask Wells for a closer account of the forms of evangelistic practice he names as “all those conversations, events, communications, gestures, encounters through which a person comes to hear and receive that invitation

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

made by God through the Church.”<sup>16</sup> Focused as he has been on issues of communication, Hunter’s concern will be for Wells to display an adequate understanding of interpersonal conversation that shows cultural competency and thus, a more effective evangelistic effort.

Whether or not one agrees with Hunter’s own construction of evangelistic practice, the challenge he represents is important. Wells must account for how such conversations, events, and encounters can accomplish introduction to the Christian faith in ways that invite commitment to the catechetical process while, at the same time, not falling prey to the felt need to adapt its practices or to translate its terms into actions and concepts more familiar to the world. Such translation would seek to accommodate the hearer at the possible expense of the integrity of the gospel message proclaimed both in word and in the way of life displayed by the Church. Yet, for Wells, the concern that such an account threatens to fall into a kingly evangelism precludes him from saying more about the shape of evangelistic mission. As a result, for Wells, it seems that evangelism is less a discrete practice, and more a quality or characteristic of the Church’s ethical action in the world. Again, the concern raised here is that a focus primarily placed on the formation of a holy Church leads to an overstatement of the difference of Church and world, as what is missing is an equally developed account of the Church’s evangelistic agency at work engaging the world. While the seeds of this account of agency lie in Wells’ gestures toward priestly and prophetic forms of evangelistic witness, more will be required for a full-blown description of evangelistic mission.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

Nathan Kerr raises a similar concern in different form in his recent book, *Christ, History, and Apocalyptic*.<sup>17</sup> Kerr seeks to map out the space for what he calls an “apocalyptic politics of mission” that resists the tendency to emphasize a “Church-as-polis” ecclesiology.<sup>18</sup> Kerr’s complaint is centered on two issues, which he attributes (primarily) to the work of Stanley Hauerwas and (less so) to Yoder: first, what he thinks of as the “ontologization” of the Church implicit to the commitment to the Church as polis; and second, and resulting from the first, the instrumentalization of the Church’s worship in service to an account of ecclesial formation.<sup>19</sup> While Kerr’s aims are not Hunter’s aims, the former seeks to develop an account of ecclesial mission that is not subject to an overstated, overly differentiated account of the Church-world relationship.

Kerr argues that Yoder and Hauerwas tend to a description of the Church that posits the Church as a stable, centered body that exists prior to its encounter with the world.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the practice of the Church, and particularly its worship, become instrumentalized just to the extent that the work of the Spirit is corralled and limited to a concern only for the interior formation of the Church’s life. While on the one hand, such movement to emphasize ecclesial identity runs the risk of intensifying the differentiation of Church and world in ways that undercut mission, Kerr’s greater concern is that such movement actually collapses the difference of Church and world, and repeats by inversion the Constantinian problematic.<sup>21</sup> In short, because Yoder believes that the

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<sup>17</sup> Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

meaning of history is found in the work of the Church, when Jesus' Lordship is completely identified with the being and practice of the Church, then the Church is given the responsibility for "making history come out right."<sup>22</sup> Pushing against such problems, Kerr reconceives the relationship of Church and world to emphasize a "diasporic politics of mission" that eschews the need to speak of the Church "as such" or "by definition," insisting instead on emphasizing a gathering of people at the "worldly site" of Christ's apocalyptic, historic "irruption"—which means, in other words, that there is no Church apart from the world.<sup>23</sup> But what does he mean by "Church"? While there must be a social body, it will be a body defined as a "dispossessed sociality:" a people of dispossession, a sociality of shared poverty, and a body "without center" and "out of control," as "action" or "gift."<sup>24</sup>

In response, it is unclear to me how Kerr constructively sees the relationship of formation and mission. I affirm his worry that a robust focus on ecclesial formation can foreclose on an adequate account of mission. His concern for the potential instrumentalization of the Church's practices, and his suspicion of an account in which those practices are pursued in a stable space separable from the world is rightly placed; these phenomena may indeed point to the temptation of self-deception within the Church. But can this trepidation obviate the need for any account of formation in and for evangelistic mission? In his articulation of a missionary politics, Kerr does not seem to

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<sup>22</sup> In Yoder's words, this responsibility for history's outcomes is grounded in the "fundamental axiom that it is the obligation of the Christian to direct the course of history so that it attains the goals he chooses," or "in more traditional words, 'to be lord' over other men and over the social process." See John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 132.

<sup>23</sup> Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic*, 189.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

address the ways such a politic is shaped. Mission and formation are effectively collapsed into one another. While Kerr raises concerns that must be considered in the shaping of a theology of formation and evangelistic mission, he does not lead us to a position that “leans both ways.”

What becomes necessary for this developing account of a Methodist evangelism that “leans both ways” is a description of the manner in which the Church seeks its differentiation from the world, but not its separation from the world. In other words, the question I address in this chapter is, “How can the Church remain ‘in but not of’ the world?” While a concern for ecclesial formation may address how the Church remains “not of” the world, and how the Church offers an aesthetic witness to the world, now we must ask how the Church can still remain “in” the world. Whereas this demand raised questions about the world’s agency in Chapter 2, we turn now in the remainder of Chapter 3 to consider the Church’s agency: if the Church and the world are called to differentiation, how can we envision the Church’s engagement with the world within that difference?

### **3.3 The Wesleyan Relationship Between Ecclesiology, Soteriology and Missiology**

This question should come as no surprise, inasmuch as I seek in this project to articulate a theology of evangelistic mission that is thoroughly *Methodist*. While I argued in the prior chapter that Methodists require a more significant appraisal of the formative influence of the world, in this chapter I suggest why that appraisal is so important. In short, the significance of this consideration is due to the fact that, for Methodists, the

Church cannot but be engaged with the world in evangelistic mission. So, while we pursued an account showing the importance of formation in relationship to evangelistic mission for Methodists in Chapter 2, what we must seek now is a description of ecclesial agency, the ways and means through which the Church engages the world in evangelistic mission. While concern for the former ensures that the Church will not collapse into the world, the latter ensures that the Church will not insulate or separate itself from the world. In the following section, I will demonstrate that this dedicated interconnection between the two concerns is inherent to the tradition's long linkage between ecclesiology and soteriology. In other words, for Methodists, the identity of the Church must always be framed in terms of its evangelistic mission.

This concern, it should be noted, has led some to reassert the primacy of verbal proclamation as the core of evangelistic mission and practice. This is understandable, given Wesley's own "submitting to be more vile" in the practice of field preaching in the early Methodist movement.<sup>25</sup> Proclamation, thus, will necessarily play a significant role in a theology of evangelism that wants to call itself Methodist. So, while it has been a helpful recognition that the Church's evangelism can occur as the embodied witness to the gospel displayed in and through the Church's works of mercy and service in the world, some argue that this "embodied method" has become the only way in which evangelism can be understood, at the expense of an account of the ongoing necessity of

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<sup>25</sup> In his journal for April 2, 1739, John Wesley wrote, "At four in the afternoon I submitted to 'be more vile' and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining the city, to about three thousand people." John Wesley, April 2, 1739, *Journals and Diaries II (1738-1743)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 19 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 46.

verbal proclamation of the gospel.<sup>26</sup> Resisting the definitions of evangelism that emphasize the Church's witness as more appropriately "visual" than "audible," some authors point out the necessity of a balance of both types of practice in evangelism. For instance, David Bosch, in his article, "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today," suggests the necessary balance of evangelism as both "word *and* deed, proclamation *and* presence, explanation *and* example." Yet, he goes on to articulate the importance of the verbal proclamation of the gospel,

because our deeds and our conduct are ambiguous; they need elucidation. The best we can hope for is that people will deduce from our behavior and our actions that we have 'a hope within' us. Our lives are not sufficiently transparent for people to ascertain whence our hope comes. So we must name the name of him in whom we believe (1 Peter 3:15).<sup>27</sup>

Given our engagement in the previous chapter with the agency of the principalities and powers in the world, it stands to reason that without a verbal component, some of the practices that the Church regards as evangelistic can appear to the world, and will be described by the world, in very different terms. For example, where Christians see acts of mercy that constitute visible witness to the gospel, the world sees social service, corporate philanthropy, or private-sector charity. Perhaps worse are the ways in which evangelism has become a term adopted and adapted by late-modern corporations to describe intensified forms of product branding and marketing. "Customer Evangelist" is the term corporations use to describe consumers so satisfied with a brand or product to

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<sup>26</sup> See David Barrett, *Evangelize! A Historical Survey of the Concept* (Birmingham, UK: New Hope, 1987), and more recently, Thomas Glenn Jackson III, *A Wesleyan Theology of Evangelism as Proclamation* (PhD diss., Cliff College, University of Manchester, UK, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> David Bosch, "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross Currents," in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, eds. Paul Chilcote and Lacey Warner, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 11-12.

the extent that they carry the product further into the marketplace, sharing their good experience, spreading the “good news” about the company’s product or stellar customer service.<sup>28</sup> For these reasons, motivated by concern for the loss of the particularity and the clarity of evangelism as the proclamation of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, some have sought to reassert the necessity (if not the primacy) of verbal proclamation in the evangelistic task.<sup>29</sup>

While I share the concern that an inexplicit witness hinders evangelism in a world of persons shaped by the principalities and the powers, I do not agree that a turn (or return) to emphasize verbal proclamation as evangelistic mission necessarily offers helpful direction. Such a move undercuts the evangelistic mission expressed in the Church’s practices embodied in priestly and prophetic forms. At the same time, a reliance on evangelistic witness constituted by the aesthetic offering of the “beauty” inherent to the Church’s internal life will also fail as a full account of an ecclesial evangelism. In short, both offers underestimate the agency of the Church in the evangelistic engagement with the world.

We can begin to construct such an account, I argue, from an engagement with the Wesleyan tradition on the question of the relationship between the Church’s identity and agency in evangelistic mission. Turning to the tradition, we will see the connections

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<sup>28</sup> From an interview article entitled “How to Create Consumer Evangelists,” Chip Conley says, “...the difference between a successful company and a transformative company, in relationship with your customers whether your customers are loyal or your customers are an evangelist is moving to that top level, that transformation level of the pyramid. And if you think about companies out there that have evangelical customers, I’m not talking about religious, evangelical, I’m talking about customers who go out and tattoo the logo of the company on their body which is like Harley Davidson. There’s twenty thousand people across America that have a Harley Davidson tattoo on their body, it’s the logo of the company. That’s an evangelical customer.” *bigthink.com*, April 14, 2009, <http://bigthink.com/ideas/15002>, accessed October 4, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> See Jackson, “A Wesleyan Theology of Evangelism as Proclamation.”



between ecclesiology and soteriology that feed missiology. These connections will clarify the Methodist requirement of an account of evangelistic mission that emphasizes the Church's "leaning" into the world.

### 3.3.1 Church, Salvation, and Mission

Most agree that John Wesley drew together disparate streams within Christian tradition in order to develop an ecclesiology described as a "creative synthesis."<sup>30</sup> Of course, his location and training make clear the influence of the Anglican tradition, and particularly the Anglican "via media" that mediates the tensions between Catholic tradition and Reform Protestant influences.<sup>31</sup> This stream was joined, however, by a second, broadly sourced, but essentially acknowledged as the influence of Continental Pietism, particularly in the Moravian tradition.<sup>32</sup> While Wesley learned the essentials of Church order and practice from his own upbringing and training in the English Church (consequently believing that it was in the forms of the English Church that one came the closest to the faithful incarnation of the practices of the early Church), it was from the Pietists that Wesley came to see the power of the movement within the Church for restoration, reformation, and renewal. The power of small groupings of Christians for the purpose of mutual support, shared discipline, and community accountability provided a

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<sup>30</sup> Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1994), 241. Albert Outler wrote, "John Wesley's own doctrine of the Church, like the rest of his theology, was an interesting amalgam." See Albert Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?" reprinted in *The Doctrine of the Church* ed. Dow Kirkpatrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon and London, UK: Epworth, 1964), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Collins has argued that "...Wesley's ecclesiology is unintelligible apart from [Pietist and Moravian] contributions." Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 247. See also Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 241, and, for an in-depth study of these relationships, see Howard Snyder, *Pietism, Moravianism, and Methodism as Renewal Movements: A Comparative and Thematic Study* (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1983).

vision of authentic Christian life. And thus, it is the relationship between the “ecclesiola” and the “ecclesia” that many continue to see as the form of early Methodist ecclesial identity. As Albert Outler put it in his essay from the 1962 Oxford Institute, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?,” Methodism functioned as an “evangelical order” within the Church catholic.”<sup>33</sup>

Wesley believed that God raised the people called Methodist for the purpose of “reform[ing] the nation, particularly the Church, and... spread[ing] scriptural holiness over the land.”<sup>34</sup> In turn, it is argued that Wesley shaped the Methodist movement in the pursuit of this soteriological goal. “What is the end of all ecclesiastical order?” Wesley asked. “Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God; and to build them up in his fear and love?”<sup>35</sup> He answered his own question. He wrote, “Order, then, is so far valuable, as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth.”<sup>36</sup> Given Wesley’s eventual embrace of ecclesial irregularities such as field preaching, transgression of parish boundaries, and—eventually—extra ecclesial ordination, it seems an evident conclusion that Wesley embraced change to the extent that it served the greater Methodist mission. In other words, the relationship between soteriological mission and ecclesial structure seems clear enough: the former dictates the shape of the latter.

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<sup>33</sup> Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?,” 13.

<sup>34</sup> See John Wesley, “Large Minutes,” in Q. 3, vol. 8 of *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 299.

<sup>35</sup> John Wesley, from “Letter of June 25, 1746 to ‘John Smith’,” quoted in Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Ecumenical Moment: Crisis and Opportunity for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 211.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Some Wesley scholars connect this arrangement to the importance of Wesley's "heart-warming experience" at Aldersgate in 1738, identified by some as the key turning point in Wesley's connection of ecclesiology to soteriological mission. After Aldersgate, and with the rise of the United Societies, and eventually, the full-blown Methodist movement, Wesley's interest in ecclesial order was primarily motivated by its function in nurturing souls in justification and sanctification, in holiness of heart and life. Gwang Seok Oh reflects this interest in his study of Wesley's ecclesiology, suggesting that a "practical view of ministry" took hold in Wesley after 1738, and created an "insoluble tension" between these pragmatic organizations for spiritual renewal and his "lasting high-Church sacramentalism."<sup>37</sup> While Outler is concerned about maintaining an account that joins sacramental and pragmatic ecclesial forms and practices, he concurs with this sense of Wesleyan pragmatism to the extent that for Wesley, the Methodist movement was the Church understood as "act" and as "mission," providing the context for the maturing of souls along the way of the *via salutis*.<sup>38</sup> Wesley did not intend (at least initially) to create a new Church, conceiving of the Methodist movement, as noted above, as a renewal movement within the Church of England. But Wesley also viewed the Methodist movement as representing that which the Church was called to be at its best, real Christianity embodied in the People called Methodist, moving along the *via salutis* on the way to perfection.

This emphasis on the pragmatic role Methodism played within the larger Church of England might lead us to conclude that for Wesley (and thus, for Methodists), the

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<sup>37</sup> Gwang Seok Oh, *John Wesley's Ecclesiology: A Study in its Sources and Development* (PhD diss., Southern Methodist University, 2006), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?," 19.

relationship of ecclesiology to soteriology is akin to the relationship of the hammer to the blueprint—the Church, its practices and its order, is a tool to be utilized for the achievement of the broader soteriological mission. Indeed, some draw just this conclusion, suggesting that when it comes to ecclesial order, Wesley was “an unapologetic pragmatist,” emphasizing that the “the supreme standard for evaluating any evangelism approach was its outcomes,” or in other words, whether or not people were saved.<sup>39</sup> This is the argument used to underwrite similar practices in the contemporary Church, so that ecclesial adaptation for the sake of evangelistic mission can be seen as good not only for early but also for latter-day Methodists. Thus, if the concern of this section were simply to show that soteriology guides the shaping of Methodist ecclesiology, we could stop here. However, this ecclesial pragmatism does raise some concerns for our consideration, especially as we seek to articulate the Church’s stance “leaning both ways.”

To begin, we must ask whether such a consequentialist understanding of the relationship of soteriology and ecclesiology will lead to a functionalization or instrumentalization of the Church. As we have heard Wesley’s own voice on this issue concerning the adaptability of ecclesial order, the answer to this question may seem obvious—Wesley’s concern was with salvation, not the conservation of Church tradition and practice, and especially not when such tradition and practice failed to nurture Christians along the *via salutis*. However, we cannot forget Wesley’s location, and Methodism’s location within the structure of the established Church. While the

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<sup>39</sup> George G. Hunter, III. *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 43.

ecclesiola can improvise (to some extent) with form and content in the search for the renewal and embodiment of Christian discipline, it only remains intelligible as an ecclesiola due to its primary location in the ecclesia. Latter-day Methodism cannot make such a claim, particularly in its American form and (perhaps most particularly) in the United Methodist Church. It is in relationship to the bodies that would become the UMC that Outler pointed his remarks in 1962, reminding them that the calling of the Methodist movement in this “ad interim” period previous to renewed Christian unity is to be a Church, responsible in creed, catechism, and sacramental life to the traditions of the Church catholic.<sup>40</sup>

What is at stake in the question over the relationship of functionalism and ecclesiology is no less than the potential evacuation of Methodism’s responsibility to embody a location within the Church catholic and the potential loss of the gift that Methodism offers as part of the ecumenical whole. First, being tempted to favor efficacious soteriological mission in determining ecclesial order puts the apostolicity and catholicity of the Church at risk. While Wesley was willing to face such a possibility in the case of necessity that led him to ordain leaders for the fledgling Methodist movement in America, such risk should give the Church pause in embracing adaptation for the sake of mission. However, in addition to apostolicity and catholicity at stake, Methodism also could abandon the witness it offers to the Church catholic, its own tradition of ecclesial identity related to Wesley’s soteriological mission. In short, this is to say that Wesley did see soteriology at the center of ecclesial mission, but not in such a way as simply to allow it to instrumentalize the worship, practices, and order of the Church. To understand the

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<sup>40</sup> Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?,” 26-28.

proper relationship between soteriology and ecclesiology, we must look more carefully at Wesley's understanding of soteriology.

It is tempting to place focus on Wesley's experience at Aldersgate as the primary catalyst for Methodist evangelistic mission, where the "middle Wesley" and his focus on the centrality of justification and the onset of field preaching become paradigmatic forms of a pragmatic Methodist evangelism. Yet, we do so at the cost of learning from the "whole Wesley." This recognition is the fruit of Randy Maddox's work in his essay, "Social Grace," where he argues that the generally accepted ecclesial synthesis in Wesley was more than a practical combination of differing streams of tradition, but was, rather, a synthesis deeply based in Wesley's own theological commitments in theological anthropology, sin, and soteriology. In other words, a broader consideration of Wesley's theology leads us to a richer understanding of the influential relationship between Wesley's soteriology, ecclesiology, and evangelistic mission.

Recalling the engagement with Wesley's soteriology in Chapter 2, we remember that, for Wesley, salvation was not simply a spiritual experience within the life of the solitary individual. Rather, salvation amounted to the "restoration of the soul" or "renewal" of the image of God in holiness.<sup>41</sup> To understand this concept we must recall our discussion in Chapter 2 of Wesley's "moral psychology." Wesley's "moral psychology" suggests the role of the "affections" and "tempers" to inform an account of human moral action. However, because the corruption of sin affected the affections/tempers, salvation must address this need for inward renewal through the

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<sup>41</sup> Randy Maddox, "Wesley's Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church," *Quarterly Review* 23 (2003), 18.

justification and sanctification available in the means of grace through which believers can be nurtured in the way that leads to having “the mind of Christ.” This thicker sense of salvation and its relationship to the formation of holy tempers also leads us now to thicken the relationship of soteriology to ecclesiology.

In Maddox’s terms, “the Church is a means of social grace for the nurturing of affections.”<sup>42</sup> This “social grace” assumes the practices of the Church as both a sect and as a catholic body; both the *ecclesiola* and the *ecclesia* are necessary.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Wesley’s ecclesiological synthesis was motivated by his theological and specifically soteriological concerns for connecting believers to the means by which the healing and reshaping of the tempers and affections can take place. In short, for Wesley, “Spirit and Discipline make a Christian.”<sup>44</sup>

This means that Methodism cannot accept a simple pragmatic relationship between ecclesial adaptation in pursuit of its soteriological mission, inasmuch as part of fulfilling this mission is the Church’s sustained engagement in the traditioned practices of the Church catholic, particularly the sacraments, as instituted means of grace that are vital to the formation of the “mind of Christ” along the way of salvation. As I argued in the previous chapter, the necessity of ongoing formation in Wesleyan soteriology requires the sustenance of such traditioned practices. In addition, because these practices are also irreducibly “social” or communal, any adaptation of the Church’s order must be held in

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<sup>42</sup> Randy Maddox, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” in *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu*, ed. Tim Macquiban, (Oxford, UK: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 133..

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” §7, in *Sermons IV*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 4 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 90.

that light; in other words, because the salvation of Christians is a social event, mediated through the “social grace” in the Church, the Church cannot simply adapt its views on salvation or the practices of evangelistic mission in order to export saving grace as a personal experience. The Church adapts as a community, and for the sake of extending community; thus “necessity” for changing ecclesial order for the sake of evangelistic mission assumes the discerning judgment and consensus of the community along the *via salutis*, as well as the conviction that such adaptation is engaged only to extend the Church’s reach as a communal “means of social grace for the nurturing of affections.”<sup>45</sup>

This recognition also impacts the way in which we must understand the agency of the Church as it pursues its evangelistic mission in the world. Can we imagine that the Church as a means of grace describes not only the Church’s instituted and prudential means of nurturing Christians in the ways of “social grace,” but also the Church’s offer of itself as a mediator of grace to all creation? If so, can we also then imagine that the Church as a means of grace also resists the adaptation of the gospel message for the sake of equating evangelistic mission with the practice of proclamation to individual hearers? Instead of emphasizing the Church as a means of grace in order to underwrite constant ecclesial improvisation in service to a narrow soteriological goal, this broader frame would celebrate the Church’s holiness as a “servant” and a “witness” to all creation, offering to the world a “leavening” effect. The holiness of the Church then serves to mediate grace to the world, so that in the Church, what becomes visible and active are the very gifts of God in salvation: a People with the mind of Christ, living in the way of Christ, and serving others, engaging the world in the name of Christ. Outler called for a

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<sup>45</sup> Maddox, “Social Grace,” 133.



Church of “martyrs and servants” that could serve the world, and his hope was that such designation could be used to describe the People called Methodists.<sup>46</sup> This is the answer to the question of the Church’s agency. The Church’s agency in evangelism is the witness of a community of martyrs and servants engaging the world.

Evangelistic mission in these terms retains a significant role for proclamation in the ministry of evangelism, but not an exclusive role, inasmuch as a focus on proclamation, particularly verbal proclamation, will severely understate the multiple embodied forms of the Church’s actual evangelistic witness that engages the world. This understatement is demonstrated in Lacey Warner’s work in *Saving Women*, particularly in her portrayal of women barred from the traditional pulpit but still engaged in evangelistic mission.<sup>47</sup> Their embodied examples challenge the limitation of evangelism to the practice of verbal proclamation and suggest the crucial linkage of formation and evangelistic mission. More specific to the Methodist tradition, Warner suggests in her article, “Toward a Wesleyan Evangelism,” that Wesley’s practice of field preaching was more than a novel form of verbal proclamation, but also functioned as an example of the Methodist movement transgressing the cultural borders created by differences of class, race/culture, and gender.<sup>48</sup> As Wesley moved into the fields, not only was the gospel proclaimed to larger groups of people, but also more specifically, relationships were built among the poor not otherwise present for worship in the parish Church. Wesley cultivated opportunities for women, as exhorters, class leaders, and personal advisors,

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<sup>46</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Tidings, 1971), 84-109.

<sup>47</sup> Lacey C. Warner, *Saving Women: Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> Lacey C. Warner, “Toward a Wesleyan Evangelism,” *Methodist History* 40 (2002), 233.

and he encouraged the People called Methodist to act against slavery and to serve the needs of the poor in the distribution of food and medical care.

This last point also leads us to consider the ways in which the early Methodist movement shaped the Church's agency in engaging the world in evangelistic mission in terms that go beyond the "ecclesia" and the "ecclesiola." Specifically, I point to the development of organizations and institutions beyond the local parish congregation and societies through which Wesley expanded the Church's forms of engagement with the world in evangelistic mission. While we are tempted to consider the provision of food and medical care as forms of what we have been disciplined in the twentieth century to call "social service," and not explicitly forms of evangelistic outreach, the distinction did not exist for Wesley. In his sermon, "On Zeal," Wesley makes clear the crucial role of what he calls "works of piety" and "works of mercy" in the formation of the perfect love of God and neighbor that constitute the holiness of a Christian life. While undoubtedly claiming that Christians need the means of grace found in prayer, in searching the scripture, and in receiving Holy Communion, Wesley also articulated the crucial importance of works of mercy.<sup>49</sup> He reflects this significance in the advice he offers in a letter to Miss J.C. Marsh, after having received her request for assistance in strengthening her spiritual life. He writes, "Go see the poor and sick in their own poor little hovels. Take up your cross, woman!... Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off the

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<sup>49</sup> Wesley writes that Christians should show their "zeal for works for piety; but much more for *works of mercy*... Whenever, therefore, one interferes with the other, works of mercy are to be preferred. Even reading, hearing, prayer, are to be omitted, or to be postponed, 'at charity's almighty call'—when we are called to relieve the distress of our neighbor, whether in body or soul." See John Wesley, Sermon 92, "On Zeal," §II.9, in *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 314.

gentlewoman; you bear an higher character. You are an heir of God!”<sup>50</sup> The “works of mercy” executed through Methodists and their organizational ventures constituted both a means of formation for the development of holy tempers and a means of evangelistic mission, the Church engaging the world through proclamation and service, in word and in deed.<sup>51</sup>

We can still affirm that the aesthetic is an integral part of evangelistic mission. The Church witnesses to the world through its visibility as an embodied example of the community created by God in Christ through the Spirit. As Wells has argued, this community offers priestly and prophetic witness, pointing all to God through the practices and ways of life that constitute the Church. His argument makes the crucial connection between formation and evangelistic mission. Yet, given the engagement here with the Wesleyan tradition on the relationships between soteriology, ecclesiology, and missiology, I want to build on Wells’s insights in order to name a more robust connection between his account of evangelism as the conversations and engagements between those inside and those outside the Church, and his account of evangelism as priestly, prophetic, and not kingly, witness. A Methodist theology of evangelism seeks to lean both ways at

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<sup>50</sup> John Wesley, “Letter to Miss March (9 June 1775),” in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* ed. John Telford (London, UK: Epworth Press, 1931), 6:153–54. A similar recommendation is made by Stephen Gunter: “I will suggest that evangelism rooted in the Wesleyan traditions would be better served by doing evangelism as far as we can in Wesley’s own style: by connecting the theological precept of prevenient grace to ‘deeds of mercy,’ which, as Mr. Wesley was fond of saying, were to be desired above deeds of piety.” See W. Stephen Gunter, “Thinking Theologically about Evangelism.” *Quarterly Review* 19, no. 1 (Spring, 1999), 36.

<sup>51</sup> Another interesting example of this extension of evangelistic mission through the Church’s agency can be found in the Kingswood School, founded by Wesley in Bristol in 1748. Wesley wrote of his intent for the school, after gathering a first class of pupils: “our first point was, to answer the design of Christian education, by forming their minds, through the help of God, to wisdom and holiness, by instilling the principles of true religion, speculative and practical, and training them up in the ancient way, that they might be rational, scriptural Christians.” Engaging this ministry of Christian formation, the school expands our sense of what we mean when we speak of the Church’s agency in engaging the world. John Wesley, quoted in A.G. Ives, *Kingswood School in Wesley’s Day and Since* (London, UK: Epworth Press, 1970), 9.

once, into the priestly and prophetic practices of the Church being the Church in the world, but also into the places the Church has neglected, or forgotten, amid the people the Church is called to serve and to love. The means of grace give shape to such a community of martyrs and servants, and as a means of grace, this community engages the world. In short, a Methodist theology of evangelistic mission will settle for no less: the Church is called to engage the world.

### **3.4 The Agency of the Church in Evangelistic Mission**

In the previous section, through an engagement with the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions, I sought to articulate the relationship between soteriology, ecclesiology, and missiology to argue that a Methodist theology of evangelism cannot accept being defined as simply either verbal proclamation or as aesthetic witness. On their own, both risk leading to the understatement and overstatement of the Church-world differentiation. Instead, the evangelistic agency of the Church is a calling to “lean both ways,” into tradition, into the practices that form and sustain Church, but always also drive the Church into priestly and prophetic engagement with the world. We looked more closely at the agency of the Church in formation in the prior chapter. Now we turn in the other direction. If this ecclesial agency is clearly located in a missiological drive to engage the world, what kind of engagement is this?

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the risks of this engagement are clear, given the formative role played by the principalities and powers and the tendency of the Church in late modernity to accept its placement as guardian of individual/personal spiritual life, seeking its relevance and legitimacy in terms defined by the modern market.

When evangelism takes its lead from the world, the risk is great that the Church will lose itself along the way, leaning so far into the world as to fall in. Methodists have not been immune to the risks of this engagement; indeed, as we saw in Chapter 2, despite the warnings sounded by Wesley regarding friendship with the world, Methodists after Wesley have often failed to keep this balance between Church and world intact. As Outler noted, American Methodism has tended toward cultural accommodation, the free adaptation of cultural practices for the sake of evangelistic growth, without adequate concern for what might be lost along the way. This recognition led us to reassert the necessity of ecclesial formation in relationship to the development of evangelistic mission.

But I also hope it is clear now that a calling for robust catechetical life that emphasizes the relationship of formation and mission is not a calling to the Church's separation from the world, or to an idealized vision of the Church, or to a sequentialized connection of formation and evangelistic mission. Remembering Volf and MacIntyre from the previous chapter, we cannot succumb to the temptation to oversimplify the multiple, overlapping social realities that simultaneously constitute life in Church and world. Now, however, we can add to these reflections the Methodist witness that has always accepted this placement. Methodism emerged as a movement that stood in the tragic distance that had developed between Church and world, as an undertaking that engaged the world fueled by a holistic soteriological mission. Thus, we can go on now to say that a contemporary Methodist account of evangelism will not settle for anything less than a direct engagement of the Church with the world.

If this is the case, then we must ask further questions about the Church's exercise of this missional agency. For while it may be clear that a Methodist Church must engage the world, it may not be entirely clear *how* the Church exercises that agency with care, within the theological distinction of Church and world.

### **3.5 Articulating the Agency of the Church: John Howard Yoder as a Theologian of Evangelistic Mission**

To address this question of “how,” in the remainder of this chapter, I turn to the work of John Howard Yoder.<sup>52</sup> As already noted, Yoder is a significant influence on Bryan Stone's work in *Evangelism After Christendom*, and is deployed by Stone to underwrite an account of evangelistic mission that takes the Church-world difference seriously and that commits to the evangelistic witness of the Church in aesthetic terms. Given Yoder's location in the Mennonite tradition, and the significance of the Church-world difference within that tradition, this stance regarding the Church's evangelistic relationship to the world does not surprise. As we have seen, the subtitle of Yoder's book considering the practices of the Church, *Body Politics*, suggests this relationship, as he details “five practices of the Christian community before the watching world.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Another author who has considered similar issues in Yoder's thought is Joon-Sik Park. While Park argues for Yoder to be read as a mission theologian, he critiques Yoder for inadequate attention to the individual in evangelistic mission and to a neglect of the “unique place of the Third World in God's redemptive mission.” Closer to the concerns of this project, Park is also critical of what he sees as Yoder's “rather too sharply drawn distinction between the church and the world.” In what follows, I will suggest that this distinction is not as sharply drawn as Park and presumably others suggest. This said, Park has anticipated some of the moves made here, as he draws from Yoder to make the crucial connection between ecclesiology and evangelistic mission. See Joon-Sik Park, “As You Go’: John Howard Yoder as a Mission Theologian.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78, no. 3 (2004): 363-383 and Joon-Sik Park, “Ecclesiologies in Creative Tension: the Church as Ethical and Missional Reality in H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder.” *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 366 (2003): 332-344.

<sup>53</sup> This is the subtitle to Yoder's *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992).

However, I will suggest that Yoder offers a more complicated development of and commitment to a notion of evangelistic mission that goes beyond the Church's aesthetic witness to the "watching world." I argue that Yoder is a missionary theologian concerned with the theological key to the development of the Church's witness in mission: the Church-world relation rooted in a Christological (Jesusological) view of the order of redemption. frame within the order of redemption..

Through a deeper engagement with Yoder as a missional theologian, and tracing the development in his own thought concerning the Church-world differentiation and the relationship between the two in mission, I will offer a thicker theological appraisal of the agency of the Church's witness. This appraisal will help us see beyond the false choices between evangelism as the Church's adaptation of the gospel proclamation to more "relevant" forms and as the Church's reliance on the offer of an aesthetic display. As we will discover, the place in which Yoder locates the Church's engagement with the world in mission shifts over time from the potentially external location in the "middle axiom" in his early work to the internal location within the order and practices of the ecclesial body politic itself. Lest this shift lead us to believe that Yoder finally concludes that evangelism must be offered in so-called aesthetic witness, we will press further in Yoder to see how the Church is called to be a "People" engaged with the world through communal discernment, proclamation as marked by a linguistic "crafting," and repentance. This exploration will lead us to the following chapter, where I will suggest that ecclesiological identity and agency in these terms is not a strictly Anabaptist or Mennonite position, but instead, has deep resonance within the Wesleyan/Methodist

tradition that gave rise to a People called Methodist, and that can aid us in the project of articulating a Methodist theology of evangelistic mission that “leans both ways” between Church and world.

### **3.6 The Christian Witness to the State: Church-World and the Middle Axiom**

Concern for the theological differentiation of Church and world emerges in Yoder’s earliest work. Writing for the Concern group in 1957, Yoder identified the distinction between Church and world as a key conviction within the Anabaptist tradition, significant not only for the renewal of faithful witness within the Mennonite Church, but also within the Church catholic.<sup>54</sup> Yet, this differentiation does not render the Church speechless when it comes to engaging the world. “The Church will still know how to speak to the post-Constantinian state,” he says, “but in so doing she will admit a problem of transposition.”<sup>55</sup> The issue of “transposition” simply refers to the fact that within the Church-world distinction, Christian ethics are for Christians, which rules out any reduction in the cost of discipleship in search of a greater audience in the world. But this leaves somewhat unexplained the question of “how” the Church will simply “know” to speak to the state. If in the distinction of Church and world the Church is not rendered speechless, if the mission of the Church still finds the Church located in and reaching out to the world all around, then how shall we envision and speak of that mode of engagement? It is this question that Yoder addresses in *The Christian Witness to the State*.

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<sup>54</sup> Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 45.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.



Yoder's drawing from the Anabaptist tradition and from his engagement with Barth's thought on the relationship of the Church to modern political orders found expression in a conference paper in 1955 that was eventually published as a book, *The Christian Witness to the State*, in 1964. Rejecting Reinhold Niebuhr's positioning of pacifist witness as "irrelevant" to the functioning of the modern social order (inasmuch as the use of force is assumed as necessary), Yoder seeks in the book "to analyze whether it is truly the case that a Christian pacifist position rooted not in pragmatic or psychological but in Christological considerations is thereby irrelevant to the social order."<sup>56</sup> In other words, if Christ is Lord, "exercising dominion over the world," then what difference does that make for the Church's engagement with the world?<sup>57</sup>

To answer that question requires some sense of the way in which Yoder conceives of Church within the Church-world differentiation. In short, the Church is called to engage the world in evangelism. For Yoder, the Church exists as the foretaste, or the "first-fruits" of God's reign breaking into the world, made visible, embodied in the obedient community of disciples, and always pointing in hope to the eschatological fulfillment of God's promises. This means that, for Yoder, the reason that there is such a thing as time is that time allows the ongoing fulfillment of the Church's work— evangelism. As Yoder puts it, as "history is the framework in which the Church evangelizes...the true meaning of history is the fact that God has chosen to use it for such a 'scaffolding' service."<sup>58</sup> In this frame, the Lord sways the powers in the world in order

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<sup>56</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1964), 7.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

to domesticate them as “vehicle[s] of the redemptive purpose,”<sup>59</sup> “maintaining an ordered society,” which is in service to the “divine plan for the evangelization of the world.”<sup>60</sup>

With this groundwork underneath us we can now turn to the more specific question motivating this study: what is the shape, or the mode, of this Christian mission of witness to the state? In *Christian Witness*, Yoder essentially argues that there are two forms of witness, “implicit” and “explicit.” The “implicit” witness is constituted by the example set for the world by the internal order and practice of the Church itself.

Sounding a theme that will echo throughout Yoder’s writings that follow, he makes this clear: “The Church is herself a society. Her very existence, the fraternal relations of her members, their ways of dealing with their differences and their needs are, or rather should be, a demonstration of what love means in social relationships.”<sup>61</sup> Against any reading of the Church as a body less “political” than the state itself, Yoder argues that the Church is a body that displays for the world the shape and practices of a “truer, more properly ordered community.”<sup>62</sup>

Consequently, what it offers to the state “may be instructive as stimuli to the conscience of society,” not through the direct exportation of practices from Church to world, but, Yoder says, obviously echoing Barth, by “analogy.”<sup>63</sup> This is to say, for example, that the world has something to learn about decision-making from the inclusive communal discernment visibly employed inside the Christian community. He also points

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>61</sup> Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 17. In a note, Yoder clarifies that his concern with Barth’s use of analogy is not to be located in the theological use of analogy itself but in Barth’s inconsistent use of it. See Ibid., 18, n.2.

to the forms of social witness created by the Church in the context of the world, such as those found in the hospital and the school, which were, eventually, adopted by secular authorities. In these ways, this implicit witness is offered to the state by virtue of the Church being the Church.

But we must note for the purposes of this study how truncated Yoder's treatment of this "implicit" witness is in this text, and how much more we will find it developed in his later work. It is worth remembering that in this earlier work, as I mentioned above, Yoder is forming a response to Reinhold Niebuhr's questioning of the relevance of pacifist witness within the social order, and thus, Yoder suggests that his primary task is to "study the much more *direct impact* which the Church can have upon the way in which the state operates."<sup>64</sup> Thus, he moves to consider the shape of the Church's "explicit" witness to the state.

Addressing the nature of this explicit witness Yoder turns to the concept of the "middle axiom." In a note, Yoder clarifies that the term itself came into current use in a 1948 discussion document for the social ethics section of the World Council of Churches written by Reinhold Niebuhr. However, the note suggests that Niebuhr's use of the term sought to inhabit the space between "meaninglessly broad generalities and unrealistically precise prescriptions," and between "absolute moral principles and mere pragmatic common sense."<sup>65</sup> Yoder seeks to use the term differently, placing it within the biblical vision of the Church-world distinction. In Yoder's use, the middle axiom mediates

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 33, n.3.

“between the norms of faith and the situation controlled by unbelief.”<sup>66</sup> Placed in this context, the middle axiom functions to “translate into meaningful and concrete terms the general relevance of the lordship of Christ for a given social ethical issue.” He goes on, “they mediate between the general principles of Christological ethics and the concrete problems of political application.”<sup>67</sup> The middle axiom creates the means by which the Church’s internal witness finds external expression still located within the theological distinction of Church and world.

What Yoder seeks to avoid here is any sense that the movement of witness to inhabit the “middle” space requires relinquishment or reduction of the witness in the process. Again, to understand Yoder’s work here, it is important to understand the vital linkage he constructs between the “internal” and the “external” witness of the Church. Despite his use of the word, this is not a move to “translation” per se, inasmuch as the Church’s movement to the world in mission is fully as *Church*. Thus, an emphasis on the analogical witness is not offered at the expense of a direct address, the proclamation of a message directed to the world, or in this case, the state. The key element is remembering Yoder’s firm placement of such “implicit” and “explicit” witness in a Christological frame, reflecting commitment to the Lordship of Jesus, and the consequent differentiation of Church and world.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>68</sup> From this vantage point, we can more clearly see how Yoder’s *Christian Witness to the State* stands as an engagement with Barth’s work on the same question, drawing deeply from Barth’s acknowledgement and critique of the Constantinian synthesis. However, Yoder’s work here also seeks to take a step beyond Barth. Yoder desires to repair the slippage in Barth’s analogical structure that allowed the normativity of the state to overcome that of the Church. At the same time, he offers an answer to Barth’s original question: “How can I speak to the community which doesn’t live from faith?” His answer to that question responds not only to Barth, but also to Niebuhr, suggesting that by addressing the internal shape of the Church in the

Interestingly, however, this element does not define the direction of Yoder's work following *The Christian Witness to the State*. While Yoder does not (as far as I can find in his work) explicitly acknowledge a turn away from constructing the Church's "direct" or "external" witness in the frame of the middle axiom, he does acknowledge, many years later, the problem such a move presents. The problem is the misunderstanding of what the axiom is and what it seeks to do. In a note from an essay written over thirty years after *The Christian Witness to the State*, Yoder acknowledges the ongoing problem discovered in any effort to identify a "common language" between the Church and the world, as such an attempt is often "confusing since it suggests some kind of lowest-common-denominator approach."<sup>69</sup>

Such a problematic tendency might lie at the basis of the concept of the middle axiom itself, and as such could not be overcome despite Yoder's desire to root the axiom in his theological-Christological frame of the Church-world distinction. Nearly thirty years ago, seeking to rehabilitate the use of the middle axiom in Christian social ethics, the Christian ethicist Dennis McCann perhaps unwittingly revealed this very problem:

The need for middle axioms was felt precisely at the moment when the Church became aware of its own historical relativity. While it remains cognizant of its transcendent character as witness to Christian faith, it also realizes that its mission must be accomplished in a secularized world of competing ideologies. But this witness can neither be understood nor made relevant unless the Church critically responds to these ideologies and critically participates in social movements inspired by them. To do so the Church must be able to reinterpret and reform its own 'social practices.' The middle axioms approach, in short, interprets 'the signs of the times' by seeking to justify, where possible, and

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larger frame of the differentiation of Church and world, the external witness of the Church can be formed in a way that is both relevant to the social order and integral to the proclamation of the gospel; potentially, both are accomplished in Yoder's rendering of the "middle axiom."

<sup>69</sup> John Howard Yoder, "Karl Barth, Post Christendom Theologian", in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War, and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 187, n. 30.

revise, when necessary, the social practices of Christians in a secularized world.<sup>70</sup>

Yet, why would the axiom function to offer only the options of justification or revision to the Church, if not but for the fact that the Church is itself rendered a depoliticized, “transcendent” entity, that must seek its relevance within the contingency of a secularized world?

While this problem refers to a conversation within the discipline of Christian theological ethics, it is at least interesting to note the ways in which it reflects the concerns of those writing in the theology of evangelism, particularly those who I suggest tend to the understatement of Church and world. Similar concerns for translation appear in Hunter’s work, calling the evangelistic Church to contextualize its practice and message for the sake of missional impact and congregational growth. To reach non-believers, the argument goes, the Church must seek something like the middle axioms that would allow it to offer to the world an intelligible witness. Yet, keeping in mind Yoder’s concern for evangelism as that which names the Church’s primary calling in mission (and the reason that God has created and sustained such a thing as time and history), this connection between Yoder and contemporary theology of evangelism is significant. I suspect that Yoder would reject the separable concern for ethics and

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<sup>70</sup> Dennis P. McCann, “A Second Look at Middle Axioms,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 1981, 87. However, it should be said that McCann’s own offering is based on his reading of J.H. Oldham’s development of the middle axiom concept, in *The Church and Its Function in Society*. While I have not read Oldham closely on the middle axiom, in a cursory reading of his work, it does seem to me that he would not necessarily embrace McCann’s conclusions, namely, that the axiom leads the Church to justification or revision of the Church’s social practices in the secular world. Oldham does root his offer of the “middle axiom” in a broader theological frame that includes consideration of the relationship between Church and world, and the risk of the potential loss of the differentiation between the two. Admittedly, a deeper study of Oldham would be necessary to flesh out this impression. See W.A. Visser ‘T Hooft and J.H. Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1937), particularly 209-232.

evangelism, and thus we can take Yoder's concern for the development of this middle axiom, and his eventual rejection of it, as more than an offering to the discipline of Christian theological ethics, and as a word of warning to those concerned with the evangelistic ministry of the Church.

The middle axiom suffers the same fate as does Barth's use of analogy, inasmuch as both stand as flexible, abstracted concepts, "messages" that are open to adaptation and reinterpretation by others outside of the Church. The efforts to "bridge" the Church and the world cannot help but be colonized by the powers and principalities that bend these flexible concepts to their own use. Thus, in short, it is difficult to see how the middle axiom could avoid suffering from the problems Yoder mentions, inasmuch as it can be disconnected from the "internal" witness of the Church, conceptually located in an understanding of the "world" disconnected from Christological claims, and consequently colonized and redirected to serve the normative interest of the market, or the state, or any other "power" imaginable.

What is the alternative? From here, we turn to focus on Yoder's own developing thought, locating the engine of mission in what we have called the "internal" witness of the Church in its own structure, order, and practices. Yoder makes an argument for the missional witness of "A People in the World."<sup>71</sup> This was the title of a crucial essay that Yoder prepared for the Conference on the Concept of the Believer's Church in 1967, parts of which had appeared in a preceding piece entitled "The Believer's Church in

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<sup>71</sup> Yoder, "A People in the World," 65-101.

Mission.”<sup>72</sup> Focusing in this article on the nature of the Church’s mission to the world, Yoder roots this mission in the Church’s identity as a particular *People*: “The work of God is the calling of a people, whether in the Old Covenant or the New.”<sup>73</sup>

Yoder goes on to further characterize the nature of this “people,” placing significant focus on the nature of the community as defined by the gospel of reconciliation as witnessed in the creation of a new people inclusive of both Jews and Gentiles. This reconciled people, however, cannot be considered separately from the gospel that formed them. As he puts it in another piece, “The breaking down of the wall between two ethnic groups *is* the gospel. It is not a fruit of the gospel; it is not an *object lesson* in the gospel; it is not a *vehicle* of the gospel, it *is* the gospel.”<sup>74</sup> This collapsing of the message of the gospel and the people of the gospel has obvious ecclesiological implications:

The Church is then not simply the bearer of the message of reconciliation, in the way a newspaper or a telephone company can bear any message with which it has been entrusted. Nor is the Church simply the result of a message, as an alumni association is the product of a school or the crowd in the theater is the product of the reputation of the film. That men and women are called together to a new social wholeness is itself the work of

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<sup>72</sup> This linkage is discerned from a footnote in Ross Bender’s compiled report on theological education in the Free Church tradition, *The People of God*. A committee of faculty from the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, including Yoder, produced the studies that became the report. While each chapter does not attribute authorship to particular faculty, the fourth chapter, entitled “The People of God,” shows a deep Yoderian influence, and references Yoder’s article, “The Believer’s Church in Mission,” with a quote that is clearly drawn from the essay we know as “A People in the World.” In fact, Michael Cartwright suggested in a conversation with me that Yoder might have been responsible for the writing of this fourth chapter in Bender’s compiled report, a claim that becomes increasingly convincing when one reads the chapter and finds there a reflection on the practices that become *Body Politics*, and a conclusion that reflects much of the thrust in Yoder’s work, displayed in this paper: “The Church that seeks to be politically relevant today in faithfulness to the example of her Lord must begin the process in the context of her internal life when her members are gathered for worship.” See Ross Bender, *The People of God* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 163.

<sup>73</sup> Yoder, “A People in the World,” 74.

<sup>74</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective,” in *The Challenge of Church Growth: A Symposium*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 43-44.



God, which gives meaning to history, from which both personal conversion (whereby individuals are called into this meaning) and missionary instrumentalities are derived.<sup>75</sup>

Here one can see the connections made that overcome the necessity of the mediating terms of analogy or axiom, shaped to establish a relevant witness or mission from Church to world. Instead, the mission of the Church is intimately tied to the order of the Church itself, even more specifically understood as the visible, historical community of those faithful to the constant, ongoing reconciliation with the “other half of the reconciling event,” exemplified in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A point of fruition for these influences in Yoder’s work is detectable in the compilation of the essays offered as the Stone Lectures at Princeton University in the early 1980s, entitled “New World on the Way.”<sup>76</sup> The first essay, “Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics,” recapitulates many of the themes already considered in Yoder’s prior work reflecting and engaging Barth: the recognition of the differentiation between the two communities of Church and state and the drift in Barth’s work toward the order and ethics of the free Church.<sup>77</sup> These commitments lead Yoder to argue that “the access to social ethics should consist in the exemplarity of the Church as foretaste/model/herald of the kingdom.”<sup>78</sup> This is not only a call for a focus on the internal life of the Church, marked by its calling to servanthood and doxology, but also constitutes a word about the “external” mission of the Church, inasmuch as now we cannot consider these forms of

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<sup>75</sup> Yoder, “A People in the World”, 74.

<sup>76</sup> These lectures have not been published as a set under this title, but appear individually in several different locations in Yoder’s published works. As a result, reference information, if available, will be offered for each essay as it is engaged.

<sup>77</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics: Gospel Ethics Versus the Wider Wisdom,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 102-126.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

witness as separable from one another. So, rather than seeking (through analogy or axiom) the identification or construction of a particular “message” that can be spoken from the Church to the world in mission, Yoder draws our attention to the logically prior fact that there is a Church, and it is itself a sign of God’s activity in the world. As he writes, “The Church does communicate to the world what God plans to do, because it shows that God is beginning to do it.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, he goes on, “The fact that God is already doing in the world what God plans ultimately to do is certainly prior both in sequential logic and importance to the use we might make of that fact as a source of information and language to provide self-conscious guidance to our sharing in the outgoing process.”<sup>80</sup>

Drawing attention to this fact is exactly what Yoder sets out to do in the lectures that follow. In “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” Yoder engages, yet again, Barth’s list of analogies between Church and civil community, this time seeking out a purer distillation of the “analogies which give content at the same time and by the same token both to the life of the confessing community and to the social witness that her presence proclaims.”<sup>81</sup> From Barth’s own list of the rubrics of Church order from the *Dogmatics*, (Church order is exemplary, liturgical, and living—or, in other words, “developing”<sup>82</sup>), Yoder emphasizes the first mark: “the order of the *Gemeinde* is unequivocally, irreversibly, totally and universally an order of *service*.”<sup>83</sup> However, moving beyond Barth again, Yoder seeks to investigate how this focus on service as primary to the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War, and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 149.

<sup>82</sup> Yoder draws these themes out of Barth’s writing in §67 of IV/2 in *Church Dogmatics*. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (New York: NY: T&T Clark International, 2007), 614-726.

<sup>83</sup> Yoder, “Behold My Servant Shall Prosper,” 151.

ordering of the Christian community constitutes “not a formal but a material definition” in the effort to show that “the concreteness of the life of the Church must not only be the instrument but also the content of her wider witness.”<sup>84</sup>

Consequently, Yoder investigates the material forms of life necessary for the Church to live into this determination defined by its servanthood, and in the process he identifies the shape of the Church’s engagement with the world in witness and mission. However, in this essay, he places this engagement clearly within the context of the distinction of Church and world, and specifically, in reference to the powers and principalities that operate therein. Given the acceptance of this biblical “synthesis,” Yoder asks, “What would it then mean that the Powers are plural, that they are creatures, that they are fallen, that they are our lords, that in Christ their dominion is broken but not destroyed, and that our ministry is to proclaim that partly realized and partly impending defeat?”<sup>85</sup> One answer to this question might be a turn back to Yoder’s work in *The Christian Witness to the State*, suggesting as he did in that text a focus on the middle axiom as the form of the Church’s direct witness. But this is not what Yoder offers now.

As opposed to reading the disobedience of the powers as a consequence of the fallen nature of humans in general, Yoder argues that “the powers themselves are fallen,” and consequently, more than the salvation of individuals will be required for their conversion.<sup>86</sup> While this situation certainly calls for the proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ through the spoken word, even this declaration will not capture the fullness of the witness to the powers that will be required for their full redemption. For indeed, as

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 151, 167.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 163.

Yoder argues, “Not only does the proclamation of Jesus call for words about him: it also creates a presence around him which itself is word and is power. The unification of Jew and Greek...proclaims to the principalities and powers the work of reconciliation in such a way that the whole cosmos has to look (Ephesians 3:10).”<sup>87</sup> Again, rather than in the crafting of a particular form of “external” witness to the world, through the middle axiom, or in some other direct announcement to the world, Yoder turns again to the proclamation embodied in the gathered, visible, obedient community of discipleship, the presence around Jesus which “itself is word and is power.”<sup>88</sup>

Thus, the witness of the servant Church is formed exactly as it constitutes a “distinctive” or “alternative” community, offering to the world, for instance, clearer readings of political realities, institutions that embody concrete forms of service for the greater good, and the overt refusal to participate in practices in the wider world discerned to be deserving of renunciation.<sup>89</sup> As Yoder writes, “Sometimes the power of servanthood will be exercised in the face of the wider society’s pressure as an intractable nonconformity, sometimes as an attractive alternative paradigm. Sometimes Caesar will encounter conditional subordination, sometimes conscientious support, sometimes disobedience, sometimes (though seldom) a provisional takeover, sometimes an exodus.”<sup>90</sup> Of course, this range of possibilities exists inasmuch as there cannot be a prescription for the shape of this witness, a priori; as we will soon see, only the Church’s practice of discernment will guide the specific form of its engagement with the powers in

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 164-5.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 167.

the wider world, judging only by the norm given it in Jesus: “The community will not ask whether to enter or to escape the realm of power, but what kinds of power are in conformity with the victory of the Lamb.”<sup>91</sup>

Yoder continues mining into the very specific, concrete life of this local, serving, and discerning community in the final lectures, “Sacrament as Social Process,” and “Body Politics” (the themes of which later appear in distilled form as the book, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community for the Watching World*<sup>92</sup>). Yoder describes five social practices embodied in the local Christian community—fraternal admonition, the universality of charisma, the Spirit’s freedom in the meeting, breaking bread, and induction into the new humanity—and argues that what each “ha[s] in common is that each of them concerns *both* the internal activities of the gathered Christian congregation *and* the ways the Church interfaces with the world.”<sup>93</sup> Again, the turn to the normativity of Church order as the source and content of the Church’s witness to the world is clear, and our distance extended from the divisions of “internal” and “external” witness mediated in the form of the middle axiom.

If the turn to the middle axiom reminds us of those who tend to the understatement of Church and world in the theology of evangelism, then it is this turn, to internal witness determined by normative Church order, that may lead us to recall Stone and Wells’s offerings as potential overstatements of the Church-world difference. Here we are tempted, as Stone invites us to be, to find the agency of the Church’s witness in

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> See Yoder, *Body Politics*, op. cit.

<sup>93</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 361.

the aesthetic display of the Church's inner life. Wells pushes beyond this appeal, clarifying that the Church's evangelism engages the world in both prophetic and priestly forms. As argued earlier, however, he still leaves underdeveloped any account of the ways in which these forms constitute direct evangelistic engagements with the world. For Wells, evangelism appears less a discrete practice, and more a quality of all Christian ethical action in the world. But while Yoder's work here is a clear common denominator to both Wells's and Stone's evangelistic visions, we must press further to develop the ways in which Yoder suggests a more direct engagement of the Church and the world in evangelism. In short, when it comes to the agency of the Church in witness, Yoder has more to say.

As we have seen, Yoder eschews the construction of some mediating language, or middle axiom, that might serve as a linguistic or cultural "bridge" between the Church and the world. But more importantly, he pays attention to this intersection because of his understanding of the relation between the identity and the mission of the Church itself. While it may be tempting to determine the shape of the Church's evangelistic witness through a heavy reliance on the latter Stone Lectures and *Body Politics*, these works are not primarily where we should locate Yoder's commitment to the relationship of Church and world in mission. This is the case because for Yoder, the genesis of the Church's mission cannot be located outside of the Church's identity as a reconciled people, called by God:

*What* God is doing is bringing into existence a new historic reality, a community constituted by the flowing together of two histories, one with the law and one without. *How* God is doing it is not distinguishable from *What* God is doing and *how the world can know* about it is again the same

thing. That is [what it means to say] that the ‘new humanity’ is a ‘pulpit.’ Just being, just being there as an unprecedented social phenomenon in which persons from two contrasting, even conflicting histories rejoice in their being reconciled, is the necessary but also sufficient condition of being able to invite the rest of the world into the new history.<sup>94</sup>

Exactly for this reason, the Church must also understand itself to be *sent* to the world in mission, not only, or solely, to proclaim a message, but also to carry the message embodied in the seeking out of the “other” in the ongoing mission seeking reconciliation. In several of his writings, Yoder speaks of the necessity of the evangelical proclamation of the Church as “news” that offers a genuinely new possibility for wholeness and flourishing to the world outside of the Church, characterized as “good” to the extent that it is shared in non-coercive ways consistent with the Lord being proclaimed. As a result, this good news cannot remain enclosed within the “ghetto” of the Church “because the good news by its very nature is for and about the world. The good news is not information which will remain true even if people in a ghetto celebrate it for themselves; it is about a community-building story for which the world beyond the ghetto is half of the reconciling event.”<sup>95</sup> Consequently, consideration of the order and constitution of the Church itself, as a reconciled and reconciling people, cannot be separated from the Church’s proclamation of the gospel message: essentially, the Church *is* that message. Thus, the Church cannot but engage the world, inasmuch as such engagement in mission is integral to the definition of the Church itself.

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<sup>94</sup> John Howard Yoder, “The New Humanity as Pulpit and Paradigm,” in *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 41, italics in original.

<sup>95</sup> John Howard Yoder, “‘But We Do See Jesus’: The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth,” in *The Priestly Kingdom, Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 55.

The Church is in the world, but as we have seen, the point where we begin to imagine the nature of the missionary meeting of the two is located in the inner order and life of the Church itself. Because the Church is the “new world on the way,” the “first fruits” of the Kingdom of God revealed in the world, the Church’s missionary relationship with the world begins from within consideration of the Church’s order and practices. However, while this understanding led Yoder in the latter Stone lectures to consider five social practices of the Christian community as “both the internal activities of the gathered Christian congregation and the ways the Church interfaces with the world,” we can go further to find in Yoder’s work two themes that extend and clarify the Church’s engagement with the world in mission, both constituting tasks of the Church, rooted in the Church’s order and practices, and located within the Christological differentiation of Church and world: first, the practice of community discernment, and second, proclamation of the gospel message, embodied in the particularly contextual work of “crafting” language.<sup>96</sup>

### **3.7 Church Engaging the World: Discernment**

We can begin by considering the role the practice of “discernment” plays in many contemporary missiological conversations. In mission studies, theories of “inculturation” and “contextualization” account for the translation of the gospel message and the shaping of the Church’s ministry in new (usually non-Western) contexts of missionary outreach. Often, the practice of “discernment” plays a significant role in such accounts, but usually as a synonym of a larger process that might be called “strategic planning,” rendering

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<sup>96</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process,” 361.



“discernment” as a reference to the utilization of tools (such as demographic studies and market analyses) that give the missional congregation the necessary information about its context that can lead to maximally relevant forms of ministry.<sup>97</sup>

But when we turn back to Yoder, and to his understanding of the practice of discernment, we recognize an offering operating in a very different key. For Yoder, as we have seen, the realm that is other than the Church is not adequately described as “context,” but rather as “world,” revealing again his theological-Christological frame. Thus, “[i]t is fitting,” Yoder writes, “that we should discern in the great movements of the age not mere potentiality, ‘power’ waiting there ‘neutrally’ until it be claimed and channeled for good or ill...” because the world is defined in contrast to the Church as the realm of that which has not acknowledged the Lordship of Christ.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, in the relationship of Church and world, the Church encounters “... ‘Powers,’ anti-messiahs, alternative pretenders to saviorhood,” which complicate, but do not overcome, the identification of potential ways in which the Church may join with the world in the continuation of God’s mission.<sup>99</sup> As Yoder suggests,

If [the powers] can be rendered usable in humanity’s service, they need to be sobered, demythified, disenchanted through the proclamation of Christ’s lordship. Their claim to adequacy and autonomy must be overruled in order for them to align with ‘what God is doing.’<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> For some signs of this practice at work in contemporary North American missiology, see, Scott Frederickson, “The Missional Congregation in Context,” in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 44- 64.

<sup>98</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Discerning the Kingdom of God in the Struggles of the World,” in *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 240.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

But, Yoder warns, this is not an identification that comes easily to the Church, “...because the God before whom events have meaning is confessed as truly God and not a distillate from or a summary of human opinions, [and thus,] that meaning is not evident on the surface of the events.”<sup>101</sup> Instead, Yoder clarifies, “*It must be discerned prophetically.*”<sup>102</sup> When rendered within a distinction of the Church and the world, and with a description in place of the world that takes seriously a biblical account of the principalities and powers, the work of discernment in reference to the Church’s mission takes on a different tint.

Discernment in this construction becomes less the means by which the Church determines the potential for relevant ministry in relation to its context, and rather describes the natural function of the community of the Church being itself. A mistake is made, Yoder argues, when one

...undervalue[s] the importance of the contemporary faith community as *gathered, worshiping, dialoguing body* in making the bridge between the collection of biblical paradigms and our present... Thus the question, ‘How does Scripture work to order and reorder?’ is transmuted into the question, ‘What shape ought the believing community to have, in order for the Word thus to work?’...the hermeneutic role of the community is thus primordial; i.e., we have to talk about it first.<sup>103</sup>

This is to say that, in essence, there is no need for a contextualization theory that is separate from the consideration of the Church as the People of God, embodying the story of Israel and Jesus. There is no need for a set of strategies that can be differentiated from

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 241, emphasis added.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., emphasis added.

<sup>103</sup> John Howard Yoder, “The Bible and Civil Turmoil,” in *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 90-3.

the way in which the particular People of the Church determine how faithfully to embody the way of Jesus to the world in which they find themselves.

In this light, discernment for Yoder is located within the “hermeneutics of peoplehood,” which is less a way to describe a method or a theory of contextualization than a function of the internal order of the Church, a description of “how the community works.”<sup>104</sup> Yoder identifies roles within the community that together contribute to the development of this practical moral reasoning, such as “agents of direction,” who speak prophetic words of guidance and challenge to the community, and “agents of memory” who guide the community’s turning to scripture and tradition in the search for faithful direction.<sup>105</sup>

But we must continue to place Yoder’s description of this discerning practice within the larger context of his comments regarding the Church’s identity as a “new social wholeness,” constituted by the ongoing establishment of healed relationships with “the other half of the reconciling event.”<sup>106</sup> Thus, while the hermeneutics of peoplehood describe a so-called intra-ecclesial practice, such practice becomes unintelligible outside of the Church’s constant, ongoing engagement with the unbelieving environment. In this frame, agents in the Church are not called upon only in the circumstances where, say, a particular mission strategy for the Church’s relationship to its context is to be determined. Instead, as a hermeneutic, discernment is a lens through which the People of God see the world. Believing that “Christ is Lord over the powers” and that “Creation is not

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<sup>104</sup> John Howard Yoder, “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood: A Protestant Perspective,” in *The Priestly Kingdom, Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 28.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-32.

<sup>106</sup> Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” 55.

independent of Redemption,” the People of God engage in the constant task of discerning the shape of faithful witness in every location and in each moment. This practice assumes an ongoing presence and sustained interaction with the particular slice of the world that exists in relationship to the Church taking shape, pursuing reconciliation there. For this reason, there cannot be a generalizable theory of contextualization capable of describing the faithful mode of the Church’s relationship with the context that surrounds it. There can only be an insistence on the presence of a particular People and the “next challenge.” Thus, as Yoder concludes, “The only way to see how this will work will be to see how it will work.”<sup>107</sup>

### **3.8 Church Engaging the World: Proclamation as “Linguistic Crafting”**

At the same time, the task of the Church’s engagement with the world negotiated through discernment can be described more fully when we acknowledge its linguistic character. In every new circumstance and context, the discerning community appropriates and inhabits local language in the effort to embody and proclaim the gospel in terms that simultaneously retain the integrity of Christian identity (understood as fidelity to Jesus) and intelligibility within the wider world. Again, drawing from Yoder’s understanding of the Church’s identity discovered in the reconciliation formed at the edge of Church and world, he argues that the Church does not live separated from the world in which it is located, but rather, is always deeply imbedded in the context, culture, practices, and language(s) endemic to the location. He recognizes that “If the good is new, it will have to be said in new contexts, where there is no adequate language for it,

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<sup>107</sup> Yoder, “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood,” 45.

until that language is crafted.”<sup>108</sup> Yoder’s use of the language of “crafting” is important, because, as he notes, “We are not concerned with creation ex nihilo; language is not created that way. A craft works out of living familiarity with the material it transforms.”<sup>109</sup> In other words, the Church’s engagement with the world’s language in proclamation is not one of simple acceptance and deployment, but rather, reveals a transformative edge.

It is unsurprising, then, to discover that Yoder resists any move that would “dull” such an edge. In several essays, Yoder takes aim at the foundationalist project to build any conceptual apparatus, a “bridge” (or perhaps, a “middle axiom”) to allow the witness of Jesus and the witness of scripture to “speak” in the modern moment to the “wider world.” Whether considering the Jews exiled in Babylon, or the movement of the first-century Christians (“messianic Jews”) into different contexts, Yoder argues that the missionary People of God did not seek to identify “common ground” with each local population. To do so would have been to accept the predetermined location that each cosmological vision offered to the missionary newcomers, and thus, to relativize the distinctive witness that the People of God bring to the wider world. Instead, Yoder writes,

The challenge to the faith community should not be to dilute or filter or translate its witness, so that the ‘public’ community can handle it without believing, but so to purify and clarify and exemplify it so that the world can perceive it to be good news without having to learn a foreign language.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process,” 373.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Firstfruits: The Paradigmatic Public Role of God’s People,” in *For the Nations*, op. cit., 24.

What Yoder describes here is the Church's task of proclamation, the articulation of the good news embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and borne now by the community that bears his name. However, as we have seen, this proclamation cannot be delimited as only an issue of "linguistics" or "communication," inasmuch as proclamation is inseparable from the order and practices of disciples within the body of the Church: the medium of the reconciled and reconciling Church constitutes the message of the gospel "spoken" in the world. This embodied sense of the message gives material shape to the "crafting" that Yoder describes as key to the Church's mission of proclamation in the world.

Describing this operation in a variety of ways, Yoder suggests that the Church's "crafting" work with local language can be a "swallowing up," a "transcending," or as we have seen, a work of "seizing" and "expropriation" that seeks to proclaim in colloquial terms the greater truth that Christ is Lord of both Church and world.<sup>111</sup> Once again, Yoder puts it best when he explains, "The development of a high Christology is the natural cultural ricochet of a missionary ecclesiology when it collides as it must with whatever cosmology explains and governs the world it invades."<sup>112</sup> Thus, because Christ is Lord of both the Church and the world, because there is "no place where his writ does not run," the Church need not be reluctant to engage contextual language (and presumably, all that "language" implies, including culture, practices, worldviews, and so on). As Yoder suggests, the "evangelical strategy" does not only "accept the language of the environs" but even more, it "seizes it, expropriates it, and uses it to say things that

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<sup>111</sup> See "But We Do See Jesus," 55, and John Howard Yoder, "On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel: Particularity, Pluralism, and Validation," in *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 9, no. 3, July, 1992, 296.

<sup>112</sup> Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus," 55.

could previously not have been said in its prior language; nor could they have been said by anyone else using the wider world's language."<sup>113</sup> He leads us to see that this interpretation is what we find in the earliest texts of the New Testament, revealing as they do the missionary shape of the early Church movement into new worlds ruled by different cosmologies. Instead of allowing the wisdom of each "wider world" to define the meaning of the early Christian proclamation of Jesus as Lord, these early missionaries "seized the categories, hammered them into other shapes, and turned the cosmology on its head, with Jesus both at the bottom, crucified as a common criminal, and at the top, preexistent Son and creator, and the Church his instrument in today's battle."<sup>114</sup>

It may be tempting to come to the conclusion that such a form of engagement must necessarily be a violent affair (a conclusion one less familiar with Yoder's work might think is ironically encouraged by Yoder's own description of the missionary Church's "invasion" into new contexts and its "seizing" and "hammering" of local language), and that mission so construed could only contribute to the problematic relationship that Christian mission has had with Western colonial interests. However, we must remember that for Yoder, the norm of the Lordship of Christ proclaimed is defined by a Christology that is primarily a "Jesusology," announcing a kenotic, vulnerable Messiah known in servanthood and the cross. Thus, in both the Church's missionary discernment and linguistic proclamation of Christ's lordship over the world, the guide is, and will always be, Jesus. Yoder writes, "What things mean, what is to be spoken, must be tested at that bar not so much of relevance as of resonance. It must echo the meaning

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<sup>113</sup> Yoder, "On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel," 296.

<sup>114</sup> Yoder, "'But We Do See Jesus,'" 55.

of Jesus.”<sup>115</sup> In this assertion, Yoder is seeking to raise concern about theology’s tendency to efface the connection of the Church and its witness to a source located in Jesus, his Jewishness, and his cross.<sup>116</sup> In fact, Yoder is explicitly critical of some forms of contextualization theory in mission theology on this very basis, suggesting that such theories rely more on the sociological or anthropological sciences rather than allowing “the particularity of the Abraham-Jesus story [to be] determinative in dictating what the method of the witness must be.”<sup>117</sup> For Yoder, the life of Jesus is the basis from which the Church finds not only the shape of its common life, but also the linguistic basis from which the Church makes its proclamation to the world, in all contexts. As he writes,

For our world it will be in his ordinariness as villager, as rabbi, as king on a donkey, and as liberator on a cross that we shall be able to express the claims which the apostolic proclaimers to Hellenism expressed in the language of preexistence and condescension. This...is to renew the description of Christ crucified as the wisdom and the power of God. This is the low road to general validity. It frees us from needing to be apologetic in either the popular or the technical sense. It thereby frees us to use any language, to enter any world in which people eat bread and pursue debtors, hope for power and execute subversives. The ordinariness of the humanness of Jesus is the warrant for the generalizability of his reconciliation. The nonterritorial particularity of his Jewishness defends us against selling to *any* wider world’s claim to be really wider, or to be self-validating.<sup>118</sup>

On this basis, the Church’s communication must then be tested for validation by being processed through a threefold set of questions, seeking to determine whether what is said

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> “...as we recognize that *christos* means *meschiach*, we can never untie our thought, or our life, from the Jewishness of those first-century events which we celebrate as Easter and Pentecost, which made people apply the titles of *meschiach* and *kyrios* to a rebel rabbi whom the Sanhedrin had hounded and the Romans had killed. The proper ground of *Zending* [mission] is a proper jesusology. If we begin there the Christology should take care of itself.” John Howard Yoder, “Confessing Jesus in Mission,” originally published as “Jezus Belijden in de Zending,” *Wereld en Zending*, 24 (1996).

<sup>117</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics: Gospel Ethics versus the Wider Wisdom,” in *The Royal Priesthood*, op. cit., 115.

<sup>118</sup> John Howard Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” 62.



is “faithful to its origin” (in Jesus); “accurate” in the terms and usages of the local, or “receptor,” culture’s language; and “authentic, non-imperial, uncoerced” in its “enfleshment.”<sup>119</sup> In short, as mentioned earlier, communication that functions according to this criteria is what makes the gospel more than just news, but truly *good news*.

This calling to be good news also becomes a key reason why the missionary presence of the Church in proclamation must also be located alongside consideration of the Church’s practice of discernment. For while the mission of the Church involves this engagement of language across the differentiation of Church and world, it cannot be divided from consideration of the Church’s internal, normatively “Jesusological” order and practices, as we have seen above. Because, as Yoder realizes, if “[l]anguage is unruly in that playing around with words or trying to be consistent in our use of words or dealing with issues by defining terms is a constant source of contestation and confusion,” then there must be focus placed on the order of the community and its practices that pay attention to both the integrity of identity as well as intelligibility.<sup>120</sup> “What needs to be tested is the congruence between the shape of believing, and of believing speech and believing behavior, in new times and places, and what it had meant before. To test that congruence is a task for the multiple roles of leaders and servants in the discerning

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<sup>119</sup> Yoder, “On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel,” 292. Also see Yoder in “The New Humanity As Pulpit and Paradigm,” 48: “These three strands join in one holistic, Christological, paradigmatic proclamation: servanthood, enemy love, forgiveness. If we are interested in making sense to our unbelieving or otherwise-believing neighbors, let this threefold cord be the test case..”

<sup>120</sup> John Howard Yoder, “The Use of the Bible in Theology,” in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Atlanta, GA : John Knox Press, 1985), 4. Also see Yoder, “The New Humanity as Pulpit and Paradigm,” 49: “[Paul] affirms both identity and intelligibility not as poles of a zero-sum trade off, so that more of one means less of the other, but as each being the necessary condition of the other, each being pointless without the other.”

community.”<sup>121</sup> Only through the hermeneutics of peoplehood, located in the Body of Christ, can the Church simultaneously retain the identity and ensure the intelligibility of its missionary witness. But to be clear, this witness is not separable from the world where it is located. The agency of this Church’s witness may be shaped by practices internal to ecclesial tradition, but they cannot be imagined apart from the world.

For this reason, for Yoder it may be a mistake to speak of a “missiology” considered separately from Christology or ecclesiology. Once again, we see how the mission and witness of the Church is located clearly within the functioning of the community itself, but at the same time, clearly “in the world,” engaging the other, seeking reconciliation, and without negating the distinction between the two. In short, the Church’s agency in mission and evangelism, while not “of the world,” is always pursued “in the world.”

### **3.9 Evaluation and Conclusion**

In this extended engagement with Yoder’s thought, I have suggested that the evangelistic agency of the Church within the theological differentiation of Church and world can be limited neither to an accommodationism, pursuing strategies of translation or a middle axiom to facilitate the Church’s contextual relevance, nor to an aesthetic witness, offering only a display of the Church’s faithful life. While the former reflects

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<sup>121</sup> Yoder, “On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel,” 297. In addition, “... The teacher is then someone charged with care about verbal formulations, who must serve in the awareness that such instruments of the faith are at the same time both indispensable and misleading... What we need the *didaskalos* for is to defend the historical objectivity of what the text said in the first place against the leverage of overly confident or ‘relevant’ applications... The task of the *didaskalos* is to defend the difference between the organic fidelity of our interpretation now and the meaning of the message then as well as to oppose other ‘adaptations’ or ‘applications’ which rather constitute betrayal.” Yoder, “The Use of the Bible in Theology,” 4-5.

the understatement of the Church-world difference, the latter tends to overstate it.

Instead, Yoder articulates the paradoxical location of the Church always “in” but not “of” the world, living amid these overlapping aeons, “leaning both ways at once.”

While this construction serves to meet the basic needs of a Methodist account that “leans” into the world/locates the Church’s agency in Christian witness as an engagement with the world, we must turn now to refute the particular concern that a turn to Yoder’s theology is a turn away from the Methodist tradition. Because of Yoder’s location within the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition, one might conclude that to articulate ecclesial agency in Yoderian terms is both to ignore differences suggested in the Methodist tradition on the same questions and to import concerns foreign to that tradition. In response, I argue that we are consigned to neither conclusion.

As I sought to show above, a concern for developing an account of ecclesial witness in terms that envision an active engagement of the world by the Church is, indeed, a Methodist concern. In fact, the challenge issued in this discussion is to those who would read less ecclesial engagement in Yoder’s own work! In other words, what I offer here is not simply a Yoderian challenge to Methodist ecclesial identity and practice, but just as much a Methodist reading of Yoderian missional theology. Where many would place the accent in Yoder’s work on the Church’s visible witness to the “watching world,” I am arguing that Yoder can also be read to suggest such an active, engaged stance vis-à-vis the world in evangelism. Further, a truly Methodist position could not settle for less.

At the same time, it is too much to say that Methodist evangelism can find its way via a reappropriation of Anabaptist/Mennonite ecclesial identity and practice. This recognition points to what I see as a weakness in Stone's *Evangelism After Christendom*, just to the extent that his reading of Yoder tends to obviate any concern with reading Wesley or others within the Methodist tradition. The consequent lack of focus in Stone's work, for example, on the issue of formation and sanctification in relationship to ecclesiology and evangelism has already been noted. Of course, Stone cannot be held accountable for the book he did not intend to write. And this recognition of the weakness in the volume does not take away from the crucial significance of Stone's work that brings Yoder into a conversation with contemporary theology of evangelism. But to go on from Stone's important work, more must be done to draw deeper connections between the insights gained from Yoder's work on ecclesial mission within the Church-world differentiation and the particular shape of Methodist ecclesiology and evangelism.

This undertaking will lead us to the following chapter, where I will suggest that ecclesiological identity and agency in these terms is not a strictly Anabaptist or Mennonite position, but instead, has deep resonance within the Methodist tradition, and can aid us in the project of articulating a Methodist theology of missional evangelism that "leans both ways" between Church and world. If the theological differentiation of Church and world is crucial for a theology of evangelism, and if the agency of the world leads us to concern for the formation of Church, and if the agency of the Church leads us to concern for a sustained evangelistic engagement with the world, then we are left with the need to say more about what guides the identity and practice of such a Church in the

world. This is my task in the final two chapters, where I will argue that embodying an evangelistic mission that leans both ways does not just describe the Church that Methodism *should be*, but rather, that this is the Church that Methodism *has been*, and *could yet be*. In short, we move now to constructive concerns: what is the shape of Methodist ecclesiology and evangelism that is “in but not of” this world?

## CHAPTER 4<sup>1</sup>

*“Christian evangelism requires as a condition of its very possibility the presence in the world, though distinct from the world, of a visible people, a new society, into which persons may be invited and formed... [the] neglect of Peoplehood may well be the central challenge facing Christian evangelism.”<sup>2</sup>*

### 4.1 Introduction

To this point, our work in the prior three chapters has been to name, and in turn, to discover, the resources that will allow us to avoid the under- and overstatement of the Church-world differentiation, all on the way toward developing a Methodist account of evangelistic mission that leans both ways at once. In the prior two chapters, we engaged both poles of Church and world, seeking to articulate their identity and agency. In Chapter 2, we learned of the formative agency of the principalities and the powers, and in turn, argued for an account of evangelistic mission that emphasized the necessity of intra-ecclesial formation to avoid understating the Church-world difference. However, resisting any tendency to overcorrect for such understatement leading to an overstatement of the Church-world difference, we argued in Chapter 3 for an account of the Church’s agency that clearly names the Church’s direct engagement with the world in evangelistic mission. In short, we have been asking how to envision a Church pursuing evangelistic mission that is “in” but not “of” the world.

Understood in this way, these previous chapters are prolegomena for the constructive work that lies ahead. Articulating the problem, clarifying the stakes, naming

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<sup>1</sup> Significant sections of this chapter have been previously published as Jeffrey Conklin-Miller, “‘Peoplehood’ and the Methodist Revival,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46:1 (2011): 163-182.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007), 194-5.

the need, these chapters have moved us further toward the constructive offer of a Methodist missional ecclesiology that leans both ways at once. The development of this ecclesiology is my task in the final two chapters, where we move now to ask, what is the shape of Methodist ecclesiology and evangelism that is “in but not of” this world? If the theological differentiation of Church and world is crucial for a theology of evangelism, and if the agency of the world leads us to concern for the formation of Church, and if the agency of the Church leads us to concern for a sustained evangelistic engagement with the world, we are left with the need to say more about what guides the identity and practice of such a Church in the world.

In this chapter, we make the first constructive move in developing a Methodist ecclesiology and theology of missional evangelism that is in but not of this world: we assert that the Church is a People called Methodist. I will argue that, in addition to the frequently encountered Methodist concern to reflect Wesley’s evangelical focus on the significant relationship of soteriology and anthropology, we must also engage in thicker ecclesiological reflection. In other words, we must think of the Church as more than the context or the environment of soteriological mission. Constructing this image of the Church, I will argue that Wesley envisioned, formed, and sustained a People in the Methodist movement, and that he did so in the development and provision of the *General Rules of the United Societies* in 1743.<sup>3</sup> Further, with reference to the work of John Howard Yoder, I will argue that Peoplehood is crucial to Methodist ecclesiological identity, and that it is from *within* this People that we should view Wesley’s efforts for

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<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies” (1743), in *Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies. Vol. 9 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 69-75.

renewal. Specifically, I will consider how Wesley conceived the Methodist renewal as a movement for individual and social reform that required location in a visible, practicing, and witnessing community of discipleship, and further, that it was the provision of the *General Rules of the United Societies* that gave form and shape to this idea of Methodist Peoplehood. In these ways, I argue that Wesley articulated what we might call today a missional ecclesiology that sought transformed lives and a transformed world, leaning into the traditions and practices of the Christian tradition as well as into the needs of the world, both ways at once.

While this ecclesiology reflects Bryan Stone's recommendation for an account of evangelistic mission after Christendom, the explicit connection of Peoplehood to Methodist identity is a development Stone does not pursue in his work. Thus, my hope is to build on his insight and to bring it into conversation with the contours of the early Methodist movement. In this sense, in the broader search for a theology of evangelism that leans both ways at once, this chapter intentionally leans one way—into the history, theology, and practices that form a People called Methodist. In the desire to articulate a theology of evangelism resistant to the understatement of the Church-world difference, the concern for the Church as a People will be crucial. Yet, it will not be all that we must say, and this acknowledgment will lead us to the second way in which I hope to build on Stone's contribution.

In the final chapter, I will lean in another direction—namely, into the world. Acknowledging the limitations that a Methodist theology will have with a vision of the Church as a People, not to mention the problematic possibility of overstatement of the



Church-world differentiation, in Chapter 4, I will complicate the theological identity of a Methodist People. In this frame, such a People are constantly appearing in the Church's ongoing missional-evangelistic engagement with the world. Again, my hope is to build on Stone's gesture toward this location of the Church, by suggesting not only this Church's visual, aesthetic witness to the world but also its direct, embodied engagement with the world. Further, I will seek to articulate how this conception opens us to a reading of Methodism that relates this sense of Peoplehood to connectional identity, and to the Church's presence in congregation, school, clinic, and shelter.

Taken together, my hope in these final chapters is to articulate a sense of Methodist ecclesial identity that informs a theology of evangelistic mission that takes seriously the call to lean both ways at once, between tradition and innovation, formation and mission, Church and world.

#### **4.2 Methodist Ecclesial Identity: Calling a People**

In prior chapters, I showed the significance of soteriology *and* ecclesiology for a Methodist theology of mission and evangelism. Opposed to any effort to limit evangelistic concern to the state of the inner, private realm of an individual's so-called spiritual life, by referencing the work of Randy Maddox, I displayed the significant connections between the practices of social grace in the community of the Church and the ways in which these practices connect to Wesley's understandings of anthropology and soteriology. To echo many others, for Wesley, salvation was communal. Therefore, when we speak of soteriological mission in a theology of evangelism, we cannot neglect the ways in which this notion draws forth concern for ecclesiology.

We have visited this theme in prior chapters, where we have shown that the relationship between soteriology, anthropology, and ecclesiology is crucial to a Methodist account of evangelistic mission. As we have seen, this is the case, first, because it resists the devaluation of the Church as an instrument of salvation. Second, it requires an account of ecclesial formation in order to resist the influence of the principalities and powers. And third, it bolsters the Methodist requirement that the Church engage the world directly in evangelistic mission. These are claims made explicit when we unpack the calling of Methodism as an “evangelical order.”

Now we must argue for a claim only hinted at previously, but crucial to a Methodist ecclesiology and evangelistic mission: the telos of salvation is not a collection of “people called Methodists,” but rather, a “People called Methodist.” Put differently, against the tendency to read the Church as the environment or context within which individuals seek salvation along the *via salutis*, salvation rightly understood is both mediated through the Church (as a means of grace) and accounts for the Church (as a visible, practicing, witnessing People called Methodist). What this requires, given our engagement with Kerr in Chapter 3, is resistance to the desire to posit formation prior to evangelistic mission, so that the salvation of individuals somehow results in the appearance of the Church.<sup>4</sup> While an account of the Church’s practices of formation is crucial to an account of ecclesial agency and to an account of evangelistic mission, the question is one of sequence. For Wesley, salvation both requires community and extends community, as this holy People called Methodist engage the world in evangelistic

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<sup>4</sup> Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 169-175.

mission. While the first claim is accepted among interpreters of the tradition, it is our task to show the truth of the latter claim: the community of the *via salutis*, the People called Methodist, embody, witness to, and extend the salvation of Christ in evangelistic mission.

#### **4.3 Identifying the Dialectical Relationship of Soteriology and Ecclesiology: James Logan and Methodism’s “Evangelical Imperative”**

A move in this direction is supported by the insights of James Logan in his article, “The Evangelical Imperative: A Wesleyan Perspective.”<sup>5</sup> Here, Logan makes a significant connection between Wesleyan soteriology and missional ecclesiology when he considers the “evangelical imperative” in the Methodist movement.<sup>6</sup> After clarifying “the evangelistic import of the message of universal grace,” embodied in the prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying work of God, Logan moves to consider the ways in which this soteriological mission appears to animate the expression of identity and mission for the entire Methodist movement<sup>7</sup>.

Recalling Wesley’s gathering of the preachers in 1744 for conference, Logan reminds us of Wesley’s first question asked (and answered): “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design, in raising up the preachers called Methodists?... to reform the nation, more particularly the Church; to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”<sup>8</sup> What Logan points to in this phrase is the way in which these emphases function not sequentially, but rather, dialectally. In the same way that prevenient, justifying, and

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<sup>5</sup> James C. Logan, “The Evangelical Imperative: A Wesleyan Perspective,” in *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage*, ed. James C. Logan (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 15-33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

sanctifying grace are not stages of God's grace, but rather, constitute three interactive, descriptive movements of God's grace, so too are these emphases differing expressions of Methodist mission. "Reform, social and ecclesial," Logan writes, "are not separate from the spread of 'scriptural holiness.'" In short, "the evangelical mission is not sequential but dialectically whole."<sup>9</sup>

Logan notes, however, that this dialectic whole changed over time. In subsequent iterations, in later British and American Methodism, the "dialectic of mission" was broken. Instead of holding together reform and conversion as "one integral whole in defining the Christian mission," Logan argues that in later Methodism, "conversion was made instrumental to reform."<sup>10</sup> He argues that this change in the view of conversion resulted in the abandonment of some of Wesley's original genius in grace and in mission, holding together, in creative tension, "justification *and* sanctification, faith *and* works, conversion *and* social engagement."<sup>11</sup> In short, Logan suggests, "This is, without boast, a Wesleyan distinctive."<sup>12</sup> But the cost of this disconnection is significant, because "when the dialectic of the missional norm is torn apart, we are left with the all-too-frequent separation of evangelism from nurture, from Church reform, and from social responsibility."<sup>13</sup> In short, for Logan, the evangelical imperative embedded in a discursive Wesleyan theology of grace and expressed in a wholistic theology of mission must be reclaimed for the sake of a "whole gospel for persons, Church, and society."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 19-20

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

I agree with Logan, but I suggest that his insights can be taken a step further to argue for the ways in which this dialectical vision also informs a Methodist missional ecclesiology. Logan's naming of the dialectical relationship of salvation and mission moves us in that direction. Undermining any sequential arrangement of salvation and mission and any reduction of ecclesiology to the instrumental environment or context for soteriological mission, Logan helps us to understand that a Methodist community is always living within the grace that justifies and sanctifies while it simultaneously embodies and extends the works of piety and works of mercy. Yet the telos of such activity is not simply the formation of holy individuals, nor does it perpetuate the error of making conversion instrumental to the Church's pursuit of a common, social good via participation in social reform and/or the redress of social issues. With a more dialectical vision, salvation is simultaneously individual (forming individual holy Christians) and communal (forming a holy People called Methodist). The evangelistic mission of such a People is also dialectal, embodied in formation (seeking the inculcation of holy tempers) and simultaneously expressed in the many forms of their engagement with the world, in service, challenge, prophetic critique, potential partnerships, and so on. Such a dialectical vision calls forth again the image that guides this project, as what we Methodists seek and need seek and need, in short, is an account that can lean both ways at once.

#### **4.4 Clarifying the Need for an Account of "Peoplehood" for Evangelistic Mission**

My suggestion is not just to follow Logan in seeking a more dialectical expression of Methodist mission, but also, to seek expression of ecclesial identity as a People called

Methodist as central to a truly Methodist theology of evangelistic mission. Recalling our engagement with William Abraham's work in Chapter 1, this is where I believe Abraham was right, inasmuch as he draws attention to the significance of the Church in evangelism. We recall that when Abraham addresses the role of the Church in evangelism, he argues that this community "is called to embody the rule of God in its worship, life, and ministries, to identify and to nourish those whom God has specially called to the work of evangelism, and to share with them in their characteristic activity as evangelists."<sup>15</sup> In subsequent work, he strengthens these claims for the crucial mediating role of the Church in a theology of evangelism.<sup>16</sup> Abraham says,

While formally it is right to insist on a logical distinction between the Church and the kingdom, contingently and in reality, there is no kingdom without a community, the Church, and there is no Church without the presence of the kingdom. God's reign has always had an Israel, an ecclesia, in history; it is not some sort of ahistorical, asocial reality.<sup>17</sup>

While he does not use the word here, Abraham's description of the Church with reference to both Israel and a historical density leads to the conclusion that the Church, for Abraham, could rightly be described as a People. Such commitments lead to Abraham's redeployment of the Church as a crucial agent in the practice of evangelism. Again, he writes:

...to treat the Church as just one dimension of entry into the kingdom is to underplay the place of the Church in the work of making disciples. The life of the Church is not just prudentially related to Christian discipleship; it is the

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<sup>15</sup> William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 103.

<sup>16</sup> In his article "On Making Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ," Abraham argues that evangelism as initiation does not require "a choice between the Church and the kingdom," but rather "a position which holds that both of these must be taken into consideration at once," and "when we do so we find that they complement each other in a deep way." See William Abraham, "On Making Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ," in *Marks of the Body of Christ*, eds. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 159.

<sup>17</sup> Abraham, "On Making Disciples," 159.

place where one learns the very art of discipleship...It is the Church which has been commissioned by God to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to all the world, to call all people into discipleship, and to provide the crucial teachings and practices which are the marks of all true disciples of Jesus Christ. In short, it is the Church which carries the right to identify the normative content of Christian initiation.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, here is where Abraham is less clear. As a People, is the role of the Church in evangelism to be a People “not just prudentially related to Christian discipleship,” sent to embody and proclaim the gospel to the world, or is it a “place” where the primary mission of discipleship formation takes place? I suspect that Abraham’s answer would be “both.” And this dialectical vision is more of what we seek.

To some extent, again recalling conversation from the first chapter, we see this happening in the offering of Bryan Stone in *Evangelism After Christendom*. Stone argues for the necessity of a visible People as a primary condition for the possibility of Christian evangelism. However, because the Church has lost much of this sense of its own identity and mission in the world, Stone rightly suggests that this “neglect of Peoplehood may well be the central challenge facing Christian evangelism.”<sup>19</sup> I agree, but I want to extend this claim to suggest that such a loss of Peoplehood is a challenge not just to evangelism, but to ecclesial identity and mission itself, particularly in the Methodist tradition.

#### **4.5 Peoplehood and the Methodist Tradition**

I turn next to an engagement with the tradition to argue that Wesley envisioned, formed, and sustained a People in the Methodist movement, and that he did so in the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>19</sup> Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 194-5.

development and provision of the *General Rules of the United Societies* in 1743.<sup>20</sup>

Further, with reference to the work of John Howard Yoder, I will argue that Peoplehood is crucial to Methodist ecclesiological identity, and that it is from *within* this People that we should view Wesley's efforts for renewal. Specifically, I will consider how Wesley conceived the Methodist renewal as a movement for individual and social reform that required location in a visible, practicing, and witnessing community of discipleship, and further, that it was the provision of the *General Rules of the United Societies* that gave form and shape to this idea of Methodist Peoplehood. In these ways, I argue that Wesley articulated what we might call today a missional ecclesiology that sought transformed lives and a transformed world, leaning into the traditions and practices of the Christian tradition as well as into the needs of the world, both ways at once.

Pursuing this argument, after displaying a typology of renewal movements offered by Yoder, I will show why Wesley must be read as emphasizing renewal in contexts of both spiritual (individual) and social (national) life, against those (like Yoder) who read Wesley as accentuating one over the other. Next, I will investigate why Yoder's problematizing of the relationship between these two emphases is salutary, and why the category of Peoplehood is vital for faithful ecclesiological renewal. We then will consider how Wesley conceived the Methodist renewal as a movement for individual and social reform that required location in a visible, practicing, and witnessing community of discipleship, and further, that it was the provision of the *General Rules of the United Societies* that gave form and shape to this idea of Methodist Peoplehood.

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<sup>20</sup> Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies."



#### 4.6 John Howard Yoder's Ecclesiological-Renewal Typology

In his essay, "A People in the World," John Howard Yoder considers post-Reformation Church renewal movements in order to identify a broad ecclesiological typology that he suggests repeats itself in critical periods of renewal. According to Yoder, there are three types: the theocratic, the spiritualist, and the believers' Church, the differences between them being most significantly their differing placement of the "locus of historical meaning" and, consequently, the proper form of ecclesial gathering.<sup>21</sup>

The theocratic type is associated by Yoder with any effort to connect renewal of the Church to the larger renewal of society in general. The "locus of historical meaning" for the theocrat is "the movement of the whole society."<sup>22</sup> The Church seeks a role of influence either through accepting its fusion with the state itself or, in disestablished contexts, through supporting its members as they wield power in secular vocations, inviting them to do so specifically as Christians. In either case, the telos is the same: the Church sees renewal in the totalizing vision of society where all are Christians and what counts as meaningful renewal is tied intimately to the transformation of the socio-politico-economic sphere.

Yoder's second type is a reactive development to the first. The spiritualist type relocates the center of historical meaning from the theocratic focus on renewal in the whole society to the inner realm of the individual's spiritual life. Thus, renewal in the Church tends toward eschewing the perceived "cold" formal practices of the established Church and toward creating para-Church forms that encourage and support the inward

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<sup>21</sup> John Howard Yoder, "A People In the World," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 71.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

experience of vital Christian faith. Notably, Yoder adds, this type of renewal offers no distinct challenge to the “established” Church and “tends to remain in the frame of the theocratic society to which it reacts.”<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to these two dominant traditions, Yoder suggests that his own tradition, the “Believers’ Church,” constitutes a third type which offers a way to “move beyond the oscillation between the theocratic and the spiritualist patterns.”<sup>24</sup> However, it moves beyond these modes not through compromise or synthesis, but by resisting elements of both the first and second types, namely, the expansion of the Church to a synonymous association with the society (within which all are baptized into the *corpus christianum*) and the reduction of the Church to para-ecclesial forms that nurture the individual’s inner or spiritual life. In contrast, the Believer’s Church finds its place as a visible community of disciples who distinguish themselves from the whole of society by their shared commitment to a form of life revealed by Jesus and exemplified by the life of the early Church. Yoder argues that it is not theocratic, as it involves only some and not all of the society (emphasizing the “voluntary” nature of the community). Nor is it only a spiritual community, inasmuch as it has a political embodiment; it is an actual body or community of people sharing together in the ecclesiological forms and practices that are “according to scripture and that are expressive of the character of the disciples’ fellowship.”<sup>25</sup>

In Yoder’s typology, the Church’s role or place is not questioned by either the theocratic or the spiritualist types. This is so because the center of historical meaning is

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

located in the society or in the spiritual life of the individual; neither considers the Church itself to be the central locus of historical meaning. Yet, Yoder suggests, this is to ignore the witness of the scriptures, which proclaim the “centrality of the Church in God’s purposes,” namely, to break down walls of division and to raise up a new humanity. As Yoder puts it, “The work of God is the calling of a people, whether in the Old Covenant or the New,” and this community constitutes a “new social wholeness...which gives meaning to history.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, historical meaning finds its place, not in the state or in the inner life of the individual, but rather in the Church, understood specifically as a visible community. In the Believers’ Church type, the Church itself is this visible, historical, embodied group of people; thus, Yoder’s title for the essay, “A People in the World. This People is the Church.

Yoder seeks to advance a particular argument for the ecclesiological significance of the Believer’s Church tradition within the larger ecumenical conversations on the nature and mission of the Church. He portrays John Wesley in the midst of a stream of names and lives that reflect an essential commitment to the importance of what Yoder has broadly called the spiritualist tradition. He writes, “That God is gracious *to me* is the good news that Zinzendorf, Wesley, Kierkegaard, and today both Rudolf Bultmann and Billy Graham (in their very different ways) have derived from Luther and have labored to keep unclouded by any effort to derive from it (or to base upon it) a social program or any other human work.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 73, emphasis in original.

In other words, to leave unchallenged the primacy of God's gratuity in salvation, Yoder argues that these reformers, teachers, preachers, and leaders all made a primary distinction between the work of God in one's individual spiritual life and the consequent formation of "human goals or achievements" that must "be studiously kept in second place."<sup>28</sup> As a result, because each of them has been so formed by the Protestant understanding of individual guilt and subjective forgiveness, each missed what has only come to light due to more recent exegetical work, namely, the biblical witness to the centrality of the Church to God's purposes, the raising up of a particular, reconciled, and reconciling People.

It is instructive to consider Yoder's use of Wesley, inasmuch as it reveals what may be a popular understanding of Wesley and the reform he pursued in the development of the Methodist movement. Specifically, it has been argued that Wesley and Methodism can, even must be, understood primarily as examples of Yoder's spiritualist type, that the focus of the Methodist story can be limited to a particular "heart-warming experience" on Aldersgate Street in 1738, and that from this basis, directions for renewal in the contemporary Church should be taken. I ask, Is Yoder's view of Wesley correct?

#### **4.7 Wesley as Proponent of Spiritualist *and* Theocratic Renewal**

The answer to the above question is "Yes and No." Indeed, while Wesley and the Methodist movement were deeply influenced by the traditions of Continental Pietism, it can be argued that both types of renewal, theocratic and spiritualist, play a part in the developing identity of the Methodist movement. To many, the latter category will seem

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

to fit better than the former because the history of Methodism itself is popularly understood as the history of a *spiritual* renewal movement within an established Church, ostensibly seeking a place for the nurture and exercise of real Christianity within the cold formalism of the larger Church. Wesley was deeply influenced by the Continental reform movements of Moravianism and Pietism, which themselves sought a form of intentional Christian life within the larger context of an established Church. It was from these movements that Wesley borrowed the structures that developed into the Methodist movement, specifically from the Pietists, the concept of “ecclesiola in ecclesia,” the “little Church” within the large, established Church.<sup>29</sup>

In this tradition, renewal is nurtured in the formation of small groupings, the ecclesiola, which Howard Snyder describes as “a voluntary sub community providing the option of a more deeply earnest experience of the Christian faith for those believers who sense such a need.”<sup>30</sup> Remembering the drive in this form of renewal toward addressing the individual’s interior spiritual life, we take particular note of the emphasis in that definition on the central importance of earnest experience. Were we to stop here, we might indeed conclude that Wesleyan Methodism fits the category assigned in Yoder’s typology. However, two further considerations problematize this conclusion and lead us to the broader position that Wesley and the Methodist movement fit not only some

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<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Collins has argued that “... Wesley’s ecclesiology is unintelligible apart from [Pietist and Moravian] contributions.” Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 247. See also Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1994), 241, and, for an in-depth study of these relationships, see Howard Snyder, *Pietism, Moravianism, and Methodism as Renewal Movements: A Comparative and Thematic Study* (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1983).

<sup>30</sup> Snyder, 15.

descriptive elements of Yoder's spiritualist type, but also some associated with its theoretical (and historical) opposite, the theocratic type.

The first consideration is Wesley's fundamental understanding of the irreplaceable role of the community in the development of the individual's spiritual life. Influenced by his anthropology and moral psychology that placed emphasis on the necessity of ongoing formation of the affections and tempers, Wesley emphasized the importance of the community that provides accountability in the shaping of the inner and outer life, both being necessary for a life that could be called holy. Thus, Wesley clearly believed that, while all must "work out their own salvation," none could do so outside of the connection to a community of fellow travelers on the *via salutis*.<sup>31</sup> Location in the faith community was required.<sup>32</sup>

It still might be argued that, even in the community context that is the *ecclesiola*, the spiritualist type continues to be descriptively powerful, to the extent that we are still concerned with renewal of the spiritual (and moral) lives of individuals. Whether focused on the believer located alone in the monastic cell or in the context of the gathered congregation, does not the spiritualist type limit the work of renewal to the spiritual development of the *inner* life of the individual? We can assume that Wesley would answer that question in the negative, because it leads us to the second consideration that broadens Wesley's vision of renewal, namely, his postmillennial eschatological perspective.

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<sup>31</sup> See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, op cit., and Randy Maddox, "Wesley's Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century Church," *Quarterly Review* 23 (2003): 15-28.

<sup>32</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 24, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, IV" §I.1, in *Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler. Vol. 1 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 533-534.

While such vision developed over the course of his life, Wesley did come to believe that the reign of God could not be located solely in the abstracted, transcendent era to come, but rather appeared in the present “through the work of the Spirit in and through believers.”<sup>33</sup> As Randy Maddox points out, despite the premillennial influences that appear in earlier years of Wesley’s writing, Wesley’s later sermons reflect themes influential in Puritan circles, specifically the commitment to the postmillennial emphasis on the “silent increase” of God’s reign within the created order.<sup>34</sup> This emphasis led Wesley to broaden his concern, not only for the renewal that takes place in the life of the individual believer, but also, and consequently, in the social renewal that these believers would inspire because of their faithful acts in the creation at large.

These eschatological emphases influenced Wesley’s understanding of the Church, of the proper location of historical meaning, and thus of the proper focus for renewal. To his preachers, Wesley declared that the mission of the Methodist movement was “not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”<sup>35</sup> More particularly, Wesley once argued that the Church “is a body of [people] compacted together in order, first to save each his own soul, then to assist each other in working out their salvation, and afterwards, as far as in them lies, to save all [people] from present and future misery, to overturn the kingdom of Satan, and set up the kingdom of Christ.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, it is clear that Wesley did not locate

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<sup>33</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 239.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-9. It is important to note that, while Yoder associates the “Pietist” movement with his spiritualist type, he associates “Puritans” with the theocratic type. See Yoder, 71, note 8.

<sup>35</sup> See John Wesley, “Large Minutes,” Q. 3, vol. 8 of *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 299

<sup>36</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 52, “The Reformation of Manners,” §2, in *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler. Vol. 2 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 302.

the center of historical meaning solely in the life of the holy individual, but rather, allowed significant room for the consideration of the particular effect such holy individuals would have in relationship to the nation and the world. One precedes and leads to the other. As Maddox puts it, Wesley saw the Church as “a means of social grace—a setting for nurturing Christian character and spawning agents of God’s gracious presence in the world.”<sup>37</sup> Spiritual renewal led to national renewal.

Thus, most Wesley scholars argue that a fundamental way to understand Wesley’s ecclesiology is to focus on its “functional” aspect.<sup>38</sup> As Wesley once wrote, “What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God; and to build them up in his fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable, as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, the Church is understood to sustain spiritualist renewal in order to foster support for theocratic renewal, as holy believers who love God will inevitably turn to love their neighbor(s). As a result, it is too simple to say that Wesley is merely a Pietist spiritualist, just as it is too much to say that he is solely concerned with reform of the society or the nation, the realm of concern for Yoder’s theocrat. Wesley is concerned with both spiritual renewal and national renewal, the one hopefully leading to the other.

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<sup>37</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 135. Maddox locates a consideration of Wesley’s ecclesiology directly following a treatment of Wesley’s postmillennialism.

<sup>38</sup> Albert Outler writes, “Significantly, and at every point, Wesley defined the Church as act, as mission, as the enterprise of saving and maturing souls in the Christian life.” Albert Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?,” reprinted in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville, TN: Epworth, 1964), 19. Also see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 241, and Collins, 240.

<sup>39</sup> John Wesley, Letter to “John Smith” (June 25, 1746), § 10, in *Letters II*, ed. Frank Baker, vol. 26 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 206.



#### **4.8 Yoder's Problematizing of Spiritualist and Theocratic Renewal**

While this recognition might help us overcome the limitations of Yoder's description of Wesley and his Methodist movement, it does not help us overcome the limitations Yoder identifies at work in both forms of renewal. He argues that each of these forms of renewal resists the other to the extent that each represents a center of historical meaning that can be plotted on opposite ends of a continuum, one end representing the inner life of the individual, and the other the society as a whole. Thus, to seek to bring spiritualist and theocratic positions into one another's orbit can only result (and has resulted) in confusions in defining the identity and mission of the Church. This fundamental incompatibility leads to the oscillations between these polarities which, Yoder argues, describes much of the conversation in the modern ecumenical movement.

This, however, has not stopped efforts to bridge these differences. In fact, we can draw on Yoder's reference to the fact that, when one focuses on the issue of ethics or holy living from both perspectives, spiritualism and theocracy "are more alike than different, for the concentration on personal authenticity and on social control is not contradictory but complementary."<sup>40</sup> This is because the converted individual who embodies the virtues of humility and servitude is most properly equipped for faithful and effective service in the roles given in the so-called secular state. Consequently, these two positions actually need one another. Spiritualists are drawn out of their sequestered settlement in the inward reaches of the individual soul and into the vital work of the real world to which they bring the fruit of a spiritual life and the zeal that only the truly converted can display.

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<sup>40</sup> Yoder, "A People in the World," 79.

Even so, given the fundamental difference in the location of historical meaning of these two types, Yoder argues that, while the Spiritualist may recognize the importance of social action, this does not necessarily require the relocation of historical meaning from its placement in the spiritual renewal of each individual believer. The same issue applies when we begin from the other side of the spectrum. So, although the theocrat might understand the necessity of radical commitment or even conversion for the sustaining of agents in their work for social change, it remains the case that the location of historical meaning resides in the belief that “what ultimately matters in God’s purpose is the building of better society.”<sup>41</sup> What Yoder leads us to see is the futility of being stuck in endless and hopeless argument over which pole on the spectrum of renewal represents the greater faithfulness. The result, he suggests, is an oscillation between poles that should seem familiar to students of ecclesiastical history and to those engaged in contemporary ecumenical and intra-denominational arguments between those who prefer evangelism or social justice.<sup>42</sup>

This impasse leads Yoder to a third option, the location in which God has already chosen to carry historical meaning, namely, “a People in the world.” He says, “I shall claim that the Church is called to move beyond the oscillation between the theocratic and the spiritualist patterns, not to a compromise between the two or to a synthesis claiming like Hegel to ‘assume’ them both, but to what is genuinely a third option,”<sup>43</sup> the Believer’s Church.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 72-3.

Considering Wesley's postmillennial concern for renewal of holiness in the spirit and in the nation, we are led to ask if Wesley and early Methodism reflect, to some extent, threads of both traditions of renewal that we are calling spiritualist and theocratic. Does this mean that Methodism was, and is, consigned to the endless oscillation between types of renewal and their differing locations of historical meaning? Is Methodism located on shaky ecclesiological ground that ignores the central influence of Yoder's third type? We now turn to a consideration of Wesley and the early Methodist movement to show that, while Methodism was a movement that sought renewal of the Spirit and the Nation, it only did so as a "People in the World."

#### **4.9 Wesley, the *General Rules*, and the Development of Methodist Peoplehood**

Earlier, we saw how some descriptions of Wesleyan Methodism might tend to identify the early movement as an example of the spiritualist type (as Yoder does), and also why we must broaden our appraisal to see the presence of its opposite, the theocratic (Puritan) type, as well. Now, we investigate the possibility that while both streams of tradition are present in Wesley and early Methodism, neither of them can stand, on their own or as woven together, as proper descriptions of the entirety of Methodist identity and mission. In fact, both identifications mislead us when they suggest that Methodism can be understood as either a movement focused on spirituality or on social responsibility or on some combination of the two.

Greg Jones and Michael Cartwright suggested that "one of the primary factors enabling the 'people *called* Methodist' to become the '*people called* Methodist' in early

Methodism was the practice of the *General Rules* through the class meetings and gatherings of the societies.”<sup>44</sup> Taking their lead, I hope to show how the *General Rules* accomplished this formation by reflecting three areas where Wesley placed particular emphasis when considering the ecclesiological shape of the early Methodist movement: (1) on the *Visibility* of the embodied, gathered community, (2) on the *Practices* that shape the inner life of the Methodist Societies, and (3) on the *Witness* that this community offers to those outside in the world.

#### **4.9.1 Visibility of the Embodied Community**

First, the Rules describe the common life of a *visible* People. Wesley’s account of the *General Rules* begins not with any abstracted vision of what a community *might* be, but rather, he begins with a historical account: “...eight or ten persons came to me in London who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption.... I appointed a day when they might all come together, which from thenceforward they did every week.... This was the rise of the United Society....”<sup>45</sup>

Methodism cannot be understood apart from the historical reality of a gathered community of people seeking the holiness that the *General Rules* were developed to create and nurture. Behind this reality is not only Wesley’s understanding of the visibility of the Church, but also his commitment to the irreducible identity of Christianity as a “social religion” that “cannot subsist at all without society, without

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<sup>44</sup> L. Gregory Jones and Michael G. Cartwright, “Vital Congregations: Toward a Wesleyan Vision for the United Methodist Church’s Identity and Mission,” in *The Mission of the Church in Methodist Perspective*, ed. Alan G. Padgett (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 96, note.22.

<sup>45</sup> Wesley, “General Rules,” §1, §2, 9:69.

living and conversing with other [people].”<sup>46</sup> This communal emphasis problematizes any attempt to render Wesley or early Methodism as pure examples of Yoder’s spiritualist type. While there is a focus on the formation of holiness in the life of each believer, and while each is encouraged to “work out your own salvation,” there is no question that this cannot be an individualistic endeavor. Embodiment in community is required.

Of course, one reason this People called Methodist was visible was due to the contrast it created against the backdrop of the lack of visible Christian belief and practice in the larger established Church. In some sense, this is why most of Wesley’s writing about ecclesiology tended to be in the form of response to critics who claimed that in Methodism, Wesley intended a separation from the Church of England.

#### **4.9.2 Practices that Shape the Inner Life**

The visibility of the People lay in the work of and ways of life that defined this community as a particular People called Methodist. We see Wesley’s commitment to the necessity of such practices in the visible, gathered community of faith in his well-known response to a critic:

If it be said, “But there are some true Christians in the parish, and you destroy the Christian fellowship between these and them,” I answer: That which never existed cannot be destroyed. But the fellowship you speak of never existed. Therefore it cannot be destroyed. Which of those true Christians had any such fellowship with these? Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them as they had need? This, and this alone, is Christian fellowship.... The real truth is just the reverse of this: we introduce Christian fellowship where it was utterly

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<sup>46</sup> Wesley, “Sermon on the Mount, IV,” §I.1, 1:533-534.

destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work.<sup>47</sup>

Against invisibility, disembodiment, and the inconsequential ties that render the Church a gathering of people no stronger than “a mere rope of sand,” Wesley argues for the necessity of common discipline and accountability in an actual gathering of people in order for there to be a community present that can bear the name Christian. Once again, in defending his movement, we hear Wesley arguing for a robust vision of a particular People who are made visible as they share in a particular form of life together.<sup>48</sup>

This emphasis continues in the “Late Wesley.” Even in Wesley’s nearly last word on ecclesiology, the previously considered sermon “Of the Church,” Wesley turns from encouraging a wide berth in understanding the Church’s catholicity and toward a clear argument for understanding the holiness of the Church, called to “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called.”<sup>49</sup> Such walking is “to think, speak, and act, in every instance in a manner worthy of our Christian calling.”<sup>50</sup> This issues into discussion about the spiritual formation necessary that will shape lives capable of living in such a manner, and concludes with a clear call for the necessity of such formation taking place within the context of the community that lives and practices this life together.

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<sup>47</sup> Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist,” §I.11, in *Works*, 9:258-9.

<sup>48</sup> See Wesley’s sermon, “On Schism,” which is also a sermon from the “Late Wesley,” where Wesley makes a clear judgment about the relationship of “nominal” Christians to the Church. Considering the issue of schism and division in the body of the Church, Wesley writes, “This indeed is not of so much consequence to *you* who are only a *nominal* Christian. For you are not now vitally united to any of the members of Christ. *Though you are called a Christian you are not really a member of any Christian Church.*” John Wesley, Sermon 75, “On Schism,” §II.18 in *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler. Vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 68, (italicized emphasis in original; underlined emphasis is mine). Can we extrapolate from here that to be part of the Church for Wesley, one must participate in the vital community produced by the fusion of practices and structures detailed in the *General Rules*?

<sup>49</sup> Wesley, “Of the Church,” §II.20, in *Works*, 3:53.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

This concern for formation should affect the way we read the *General Rules* and conceive of their function and purpose in the Methodist movement. It is clear enough that the Rules are structured in such a way as to encourage the formation of holiness in the classes and societies to which they gave shape and guidance. Under each of the three rules, Wesley is able to spell out in clear terms the particular adhesions and renunciations that constitute evidence of the “desire of salvation” and that reflect “walking worthily.” Because the requirements to join a class meeting in early Methodism were so minimal—only the desire for salvation was necessary—the *General Rules* supplied the “basics for Christian living in the world with whatever ‘degree of faith’ one had been graced.”<sup>51</sup>

The Rules, therefore, can be seen to have fulfilled a catechetical function, introducing the ways of discipleship, the specific patterns of the way of a Christian in the world. From these very social, communal practices of piety and mercy, the disciple “confidently expected the blessings of God’s grace, first to bring [her] the assurance of faith, and then to build [her] up as [an] obedient [disciple].”<sup>52</sup> Thus, resisting any tendency in the contemporary Church to understand Methodist faith as solely an experience of the inward assurance of saving faith that precedes the engagement with the life and practices of the community, Lowes Watson argues strongly for the necessary engagement with the very particular practices among People called Methodist as integral to salvation. Here we must remember Yoder’s point that it is from the perspective of this

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<sup>51</sup> David Lowes Watson, “Class Leaders and Class Meetings: Recovering a Methodist Tradition for a Changing Church,” in *Doctrines and Discipline, United Methodism and American Culture, vol. 3.*, eds. Dennis M. Campbell, William B. Lawrence, and Russell E. Richey (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 245-264, and David Lowes Watson, “Aldersgate Street and the *General Rules*: The Form and Power of Methodist Discipleship,” in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, ed. Randy Maddox (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1990), 33-47.

<sup>52</sup> Lowes Watson, “Aldersgate Street”, 45-46.

particular community that both “personal conversion (whereby individuals are called into this meaning) and missionary instrumentalities are derived.”<sup>53</sup> Drawing from the first half of that sentence, we can see that the spiritual renewal of the individual is defined here by the central importance of the visible community and its shared practices, without which evangelism and conversion become unintelligible.

#### **4.9.3 Witness Offered by the Community**

The fact that “missionary instrumentalities” are also shaped by their primary location inside the community of faith guides us to the consideration of Wesley’s *third* emphasis. The visible and practicing People called Methodist are sent in mission and witness to the world. Wesley closes his sermon, “Of the Church,” with encouragement directed to this holy People in language that displays both the necessary visibility of the Church as well as a vision of the Church in eschatological terms that serve as a particular witness to the world. “In the meantime,” Wesley writes, between now and the coming of the Kingdom,

...let all those who are real members of the Church see that they walk holy and unblameable in all things.... Show [all] your faith by your works. Let them see by the whole tenor of your conversation that your hope is all laid up above! Let all your words and actions evidence the spirit whereby you are animated! Above all things, let your love abound. Let it extend to every child of man; let it overflow to every child of God. By this let all men know whose disciples ye are, because you love one another.<sup>54</sup>

Wesley makes a distinction here between the Church and the “men of the world” and the “lover(s) of the world” who are guided by different commitments and who are “dead to

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<sup>53</sup> Yoder, 74.

<sup>54</sup> Wesley, “Of the Church,” § III.30, in *Works*, 3:56-57. See also Wesley’s sermon, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, IV,” particularly §II.2ff, where we have seen that Wesley makes clear that Christianity requires community, but where he also goes on to suggest that, when “real” among believers, it cannot be hidden from the watching world.



God.” The “real members of the Church” are called to a different way, not just in belief, but in “words and actions,” embodied and visible, on display to the world.<sup>55</sup>

Such words and actions find clear and detailed expression in the *General Rules*, where Wesley describes very specific spiritual, bodily, economic, and community practices that are required of Methodists. However, rather than just reading these rules as the encouragements to individuals continuing in the Society, we must note how they also reflect Wesley’s understanding of the relationship of Church and world, and how the adherence to the injunction to do no harm and to do “good of every possible sort and as far as is possible to all men” has a cost for those within this community of witness. To live in this way, Wesley suggests, means that Methodists must also seek to do good

by running with patience the race that is set before them; “denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily”; submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should “say all manner of evil of them falsely, for their Lord’s sake.”<sup>56</sup>

The holiness of the Church is discovered in the holiness of its members, and together, in the practices and ways of their common holy lives, they render the Church visible in the world, perhaps to be rejected by the world, but sent to witness to that world all the same.

As Wesley put it,

We look upon the Methodists (so called) in general, not as any particular party; (this would exceedingly obstruct the grand design, for which we conceive God has raised them up), but as living witnesses, in and to every party, of that Christianity which we preach; which is hereby demonstrated to be a real thing, and visibly held out to all the world.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Wesley, “Of the Church,” §III.28, 29, in *Works*, 3:56.

<sup>56</sup> Wesley, “General Rules,” §5, in *Works*, 9:72.

<sup>57</sup> Wesley, “Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England” (1758) §III.1, in *Works*, 9:337.

In these three emphases, particularly reflected in the *General Rules*, Wesley named the conditions necessary to create and sustain a particular People, defined by its visibility, formed and sustained by its practices, and sent to the world as a witness to God's creating and reconciling work. When we keep in mind this Peoplehood that Wesley encouraged and formed in his early Methodist movement through the *General Rules*, we are positioned to argue further that we see connections to Yoder's third type, identified as the location of historical meaning and renewal discovered in the Believer's Church tradition. Philip Meadows suggests:

This Anabaptist thinking [regarding the Church as a social reality] tempts me to take liberty with the meaning of early Methodist "societies." *Each society, bound by a common rule and a set of common practices could easily be thought of as a "social reality" in its own right.* Their public, cultural and political life was that of striving after scriptural holiness. The "General Rule" (of doing no harm, doing all the good they can, and attending to the means of grace) had the effect of holding them to a form of Kingdom living that resisted selfish ambition and accumulation in favour of good stewardship.... And he guides them in the use of money to earn all they can (i.e., without injury to self or neighbour), save all they can (i.e., not wasting what they have earned), and give all they can (i.e., of that which exceeds their own basic needs). Wesley aims to describe a way of life literally consistent with the language of the Ten Commandments and the teaching of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount (a text much used by Anabaptists). I am again indebted to the Anabaptists for helping me see how a Christian community that embodies the gospel does not happen by accident, but requires an intentional commitment to a form of life capable of resisting the dominant social realities of the world.<sup>58</sup>

I argue that this connection between the societies that comprised the early Methodist movement, created and guided by the *General Rules* and their identification as ecclesial entities in their own right, is not at all farfetched.

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<sup>58</sup> Philip R Meadows, "Anabaptist Leanings of a 'Kinda' Methodist," *The Anabaptist Network*, March 2006, <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/354>, accessed April 13, 2010, emphasis added.

Given Wesley's own commitments to a Methodist Peoplehood defined by its visibility, holy practices, and witness to the world, Meadows's connection may be, more than an interesting idea, reflective of Wesley's manifestation of the influence from the Believer's Church tradition. Consequently, each of the societies in the early Methodist movement should be understood as a People in the World, each, as Meadows suggests, a social reality in its own right.<sup>59</sup> To fully understand the meaning of the Methodist renewal, then, we must take Yoder's typology very seriously, and admit that beyond spiritualist or theocratic interests, Wesleyan Methodism began as a movement to develop a visible, practicing, and witnessing holy People called Methodists. If this is the case, then the understanding of early Methodism as a movement for spiritualist or theocratic renewal faces a challenge, as both types of renewal must now first be located in and shaped by the primary identity of the Methodist Peoplehood.

I believe this is what Wesley envisioned when he offered up the *General Rules*: not only a renewal movement within the larger Church, but a community of holy People who make up a visible community, practicing discipleship in the means of grace and witnessing to the world. Thus, against interpretations of Wesleyan Methodism as a purely spiritualist or pietistic movement, and also against interpretations that place its sole focus on the reform of the nation, we must conclude that Wesley's own hopes for renewal in the Church and the nation could not be separated from their location within the visible, disciplined, and witnessing *People* called Methodist.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

#### 4.10 Implications for Contemporary (United Methodist) Ecclesiology and Evangelistic Mission

If it is the case that such a sense of Peoplehood informed early Methodism, then I am suggesting, therefore, the necessary inclusion of the same as a vital element in contemporary conversations concerning Methodist ecclesial identity, mission, and practice. While a repristination of early Methodist life cannot be the goal here, reflection on the People called Methodist can provide contemporary Methodism with historical memory that has the potential to “make the present strange to us,” and thus to interrogate current assumptions and beliefs regarding the nature of the Church, its mission, and the potential sources for renewal.<sup>60</sup>

It is surely beyond the limits of this chapter to consider the complex historical account of the development of Methodism not only in Britain, but also, and more particularly, in America, where the movement first became a Church.<sup>61</sup> However, what we can confidently say is that Yoder’s named oscillation between spiritualist and theocratic polarities has been with us for some time. As Randy Maddox reminds us,

North American Protestantism of the early twentieth century tended to divide across the board into warring camps over the mission of the

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<sup>60</sup> Rowan Williams is helpful on this point when he suggests that “good historical writing...is writing that constructs that sense of who we are by a real engagement with the strangeness of the past...” so that “the end product is a sense who we now are that is subtle enough to encompass the things we don’t fully understand.” See Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 23-4.

<sup>61</sup> In fact, while this chapter will not enter into the historical account of the developing role the *General Rules* played in later, post-Wesleyan British and American Methodism, it is particularly vital to understand their defining influence in early American Methodism. As Randy Maddox states, “...the operative definition of ‘Church’ in early American Methodism was that of the society in the *General Rules*.” It is equally important to understand the loss of the *Rules* in that same context. For excellent accounts of the *General Rules*’ function and their loss in the American context, see Randy Maddox, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” in *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu*, ed. Tim Maquiban (Oxford, UK: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 131-160, and L. Gregory Jones and Michael G. Cartwright, “Vital Congregations: Toward a Wesleyan Vision for the United Methodist Church’s Identity and Mission,” in *The Mission of the Church in Methodist Perspective*, ed. Alan G. Padgett (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), particularly 97-110.

Church. The result was all-too-often a lamentable polarization between concern for the spiritual transformation of individual lives and efforts for the socio-economic transformation of an alienating and oppressive social order. This polarization was as frequent in Methodist circles as anywhere else, and its aftershocks remain with us.<sup>62</sup>

One place I believe this division is evident is in the contemporary treatment of the *General Rules* in the discipline and life of the contemporary UMC.

Until they lost their place, The *General Rules* had a defining position in the ecclesiological identity of the early American Methodist Church.<sup>63</sup> Their loss, however was such that today, they are but a memory in the United Methodist Church, relegated to a section in the *Book of Discipline* rarely visited and often eclipsed by the more familiar *Social Principles*. Yet, when considered together in the *Discipline*, it becomes evident that the *Rules* are identified as a resource to shape the inward spiritual life of the believer, while the *Social Creed* and its later development into the *Social Principles* direct the Methodist's attention to reform in the society and nation.<sup>64</sup> In short, here we see the differentiation between spiritualist and theocratic orientations operating to place these documents in such a way as to suggest that contemporary Methodism cannot simply

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<sup>62</sup> Maddox, "Social Grace," 148. Maddox points readers to Jean Schmidt's *Souls or the Social Order* as a "pioneering study of this development." See Maddox, 148, note 117.

<sup>63</sup> "...under the influence of the 'social gospel', the 'Social Creed' (1908, 1952) would complete the process of supplanting the '*General Rules*' as a primary focus of moral discipline for 'the people called Methodist.' By the time the 1972 *Book of Discipline* of the United Methodist Church is published, the 'Social Principles' have taken center stage, and the 'General Rules of the United Societies' have been placed in a section called 'Foundation Documents.'" Jones and Cartwright, 107. In *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2004*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), the *Social Principles* are found in Part IV, pages 95-125, paragraphs 160-166. The *General Rules* are found in paragraph 103, pages 71-74, which is located within Part II, "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task." The *Rules* come after the full presentation of the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church, and references to the Standard Sermons and the Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament (p. 71), all within paragraph 103.

<sup>64</sup> *Discipline*, ¶101, p. 48-9. In this section, the similarities and differences between the *Rules* and the *Principles* are considered to represent the differences between the "personal gospel" and the "social gospel." The distinction made between the "personal" and the "social" display the very problem to which Yoder directs our attention.

choose one over the other, spirituality or social responsibility, but instead must seek to embody both.

Yet, according to Yoder, this is a reconciliation that cannot be brokered if we allow that the differences between spirituality and social responsibility, between evangelism and social justice, between spiritualist and theocratic renewal, are differences in locations of historical meaning. If this is granted, then what becomes necessary is a third option, and as we have seen, Yoder offers us the Believer's Church tradition, locating historical meaning in the People of God. God created this particular People from Abraham, liberated them from Egypt, called them together as the Body of Christ, and also, as I have sought to show in this study, formed them from the Parishes of eighteenth-century England to be the People called Methodist. What I am suggesting, therefore, is the necessary inclusion of Peoplehood as a vital element of Methodist ecclesial identity and evangelistic mission. One place this inclusion is evident is the *General Rules*. When we speak about the People called Methodist in these ways, we will find the resources we need to go beyond the oscillation and argumentation over the proper center for Methodist identity and renewal, and will find a location that will render intelligible for contemporary purposes Wesley's postmillennial hope for the transformation of lives and the world.

Certainly, one hopeful manifestation of these resources is the recent elaboration of *The United Methodist Way* and its inclusion of the necessity to "Observe the General Rules" as the first of four particular "calls to action" within the UMC, identifying these

four calls as “leading edges of our response.”<sup>65</sup> This will certainly be a helpful reminder to the Church, first, that the *Rules* exist, but no less important, that these *Rules* name the practices that define Methodist identity and that demand regular attention as they mediate the “crucial dynamic” of “doctrine, spirit, and discipline.”<sup>66</sup>

As important as I agree this reminder is for the faithful future of the UMC, in the light of the claims made in this essay, I must ask, however, whether there is enough emphasis on (what I take to be) the fact that the *Rules* mediate the “doctrine, spirit, and discipline” of the Methodist Way in the context of a distinct People. While the primary affirmation of the Methodist Way reflects Wesley’s commitments to “transformed lives” and a “transformed world”, without the explicit placement of such hopes for transformation within the visible, disciplined, practicing, witnessing People called Methodist, is there some risk that the polarization between spirituality and social responsibility will reassert itself? More problematic, it seems to me, would be the potential for distortion in the formation of ministries seeking each type of transformation, again risking the possibility that they could be conceived and enacted in ways that obviate the need for their deep connection to the particular People as expressions of their Peoplehood in the world. While the authors of the document are deeply aware of the history regarding this issue, the concern will be that those who make use of the document may not have the same memory. Consequently, more explicit focus on the distinct nature

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<sup>65</sup> “The United Methodist Way: Living the Christian Life in Covenant with Christ and One Another,” *gbod.org*, Nashville, TN: General Board of Discipleship, The United Methodist Church, [http://www.gbod.org/atf/cf/%7B3482e846-598f-460a-b9a7-386734470eda%7D/THE\\_UNITED\\_METHODIST\\_WAY.PDF](http://www.gbod.org/atf/cf/%7B3482e846-598f-460a-b9a7-386734470eda%7D/THE_UNITED_METHODIST_WAY.PDF), accessed December 30, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

of Methodist Peoplehood and its identification in and dependence on the *General Rules* may be salutary in the ongoing conversations and efforts seeking this renewal.

Against this conclusion, one might argue that it must be acknowledged that David Lowes Watson was right about the fact that the significant difference between the ecclesiological status of the contemporary UMC versus that of the early Methodist societies makes a direct importation of the *General Rules* quite impossible.<sup>67</sup> In essence, the argument goes, we cannot reasonably expect the rigorous discipline of early Methodism to find a happy home in the contemporary congregations that constitute United Methodism—an argument which is, most likely, quite correct. In response, however, one might first offer a counter-concern, namely, that such warnings tend to allow the continuation of what has developed into a generalized amnesia regarding the central importance (and eventual marginalization) of the *General Rules* in the story of Methodism and, consequently, a dismissal of the *Rules* as containing any meaningful guidance for the shape of contemporary Methodist life. While one can point to the fact that there are significant differences of interpretive opinion regarding the ecclesiological identity of the contemporary UMC,<sup>68</sup> one can also reserve final judgment on those issues in order to suggest that these differences do not exonerate us from the responsibility to

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<sup>67</sup> Lowes Watson, “Aldersgate Street,” 46.

<sup>68</sup> See Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?”, 11-28. Or consider the comment of Francis Asbury regarding the ecclesiological puzzlement that defined the developing Methodist movement in America: “We were a Church and no Church.” See Francis Asbury, “Valedictory Address,” *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, Volume 3, Letters*, eds. J. Manning Potts, et. al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958), 476-477. More particularly related to the UMC, See the Nov-Dec 2007/Jan 2008 issue of the *Circuit Rider* that addressed the Ministry Study. Some of the article titles include “Identity Crisis: Our Quest for an Ecclesiology” and “Is United Methodism a Church?” See *Circuit Rider*, 32 (November-December-January 2007-2008).



pay attention to the *Rules*, to the form of community they created, and to the ways in which we might be guided by them in our contemporary circumstances.

Of course, the primary reason to suggest the adoption of the notion of Peoplehood of the Church is for the sake of articulating a theology of evangelism for Methodism that truly leans both ways at once. Envisioning the Church as a People is a move toward resisting the understatement of the Church-world difference in ways that lead to the eventual collapse of the former into the latter. As we discussed in the second chapter, given the formative agency of the principalities and the powers, particularly those in service to the ends of the modern market, focus on the Church as a People is critical. As I tried to show there, under the conditions of life in what Philip Bobbitt has called the “market-state,” rendering all citizens therein primarily as consumers, how can the Church be perceived as anything other than a provider of goods and services, competing for the most significant resources consumers have to give, namely, their money and their time?<sup>69</sup> Despite any awareness inside the Church that it lives and is rendered as such within the context of the “market-state,” and regardless of any efforts made from within the Church to resist and subvert such a categorization, the formative power of the market-state cannot be denied; even the Church that consciously seeks to live as a counter-cultural community, located off the grid, can still be (and often is) readily adopted as yet another product offered to fulfill the needs of yet another

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<sup>69</sup> “[Bobbitt] sees our present context as one where the nation state's inability to deliver in the terms we have become used to, its inability to meet the expectations we now bring, has led to a shift into a new political mode, the market state, in which the function of government - and the thing that makes government worth obeying - is to clear a space for individuals or groups to do their own negotiating, to secure the best deal or the best value for money in pursuing what they want.” Rowan Williams, “The Richard Dimbleby Lecture, 2002, *The Archbishop of Canterbury*, <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/846>, accessed February 2, 2009.

demographically identified niche within the market population.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, such conditions have a negative effect on the actual visibility of the Church, inasmuch as the world is watching only that which it is formed to watch, namely, that which rises to the level of visibility through forms of specified advertising shaped by the demographic knowledge of the end-user.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, as Stone acknowledges, it may be the case that the Church's practices, when actually made visible to a watching world, will surely be misconstrued, judged as odd, or actually dismissed by the world. However, without the density of the historical community, the Peoplehood of the Church as visible, practicing, and witnessing, the possibility for evangelistic witness grows weak.

Thus, I want to further encourage the renewal of focus placed on *The General Rules*, as both United Methodist doctrine and as a key source for the development of a Methodist sense of Peoplehood. This proposal leads me to suggest the connection of the *General Rules* as United Methodist Doctrine to the practical theological task seeking the development of local expressions with concern for both traditional consistency and practical wisdom.<sup>72</sup> I will point to what I think are three potential leanings or directions for such conversations.

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<sup>70</sup> Another example of this trend can be found in the phenomenon of the re-packaging of John Wesley's "General Rules," originally offered to discipline the life of the early Methodist Societies, but now made available to contemporary United Methodists in a devotional form—"Three Simple Rules," and with associated merchandise, such as the "Three Simple Rules DVD," the "Three Simple Rules Bookmark," and the "Three Simple Rules Daily Planner."

<sup>71</sup> This is to say that there is no reason to believe that a Church will be visible to a world that learns what it should see through the lead page of the Yahoo! news page, promoted videos on YouTube, or the personalized Google-powered advertising sidebar on your Facebook profile page.

<sup>72</sup> I take Bishop Rueben Job's recent effort as a step into this conversation. See Rueben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007). Despite his generous read of the *Rules*, though, there is room for much more to be done here.

First, these reflections draw attention to the congregation. Rather than seeking to balance ministries of spiritual renewal and evangelism with ministries of mission and social witness, a focus on the Peoplehood formed and sustained in the *Rules* emphasizes the nature of the congregation itself. In that context, a key element of practical, pastoral theological leadership seeking the contemporary contextualization of the *General Rules* will be to facilitate questions such as: “How do we ourselves, in our life together, reflect or fall short of the ‘new social wholeness’ that God seeks to create?”<sup>73</sup> “What are the practices of holy living and the means of grace among us today, and which have we forgotten over time?” And, “How is our life together as a People a witness to the world, a ‘sign, sacrament, and herald of God’s presence and God’s reign’?”<sup>74</sup> Small steps like these may help to broaden the ecclesial imagination, to re-vision the congregation as a particular People in the world, and to reclaim the formative importance of the *General Rules*.

Second, I suggest that these emphases also draw us to look to broader conversations for potential overlap and mutual enrichment. Other signs of renewal appear in contemporary movements that have sought to reclaim the role of the common rule within disciplined communities, movements to which we should pay close attention and seek to engage in ongoing conversation. For example, we have much to learn from the ongoing conversations in the development of the “New Monasticism” within

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<sup>73</sup> Yoder, 74.

<sup>74</sup> Phil Kenneson, “Visible Grace: The Church as God’s Embodied Presence,” in *Grace Upon Grace: Essays in Honor of Thomas A. Langford*, eds. Robert K. Johnston, L. Gregory Jones, and Jonathan R. Wilson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 169-179. Kenneson suggests that the Church is the “embodied presence” of “visible grace,” and as such, the Church is sent to the world as the “sign, sacrament, and herald of God’s presence and God’s reign.”

communities that emulate the fusion of spiritual and social concern from within a distinct, rule-based community.<sup>75</sup> A recently released book by Elaine Heath and Scott Kisker, *Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community*, makes these connections more explicitly.<sup>76</sup>

These reflections push toward a third context for more conversation, which would be the increased interest in new congregational development, or Church planting. The United Methodist Church seeks in one of its current “Vision Pathways” to start new congregations (even one every day, according to the “Call to Action”), and embodied this vision in the “Path One” initiative, which seeks to create 650 new congregations by 2012. However, in light of such missional commitments, we must ask what theological, and more specifically, ecclesiological, imagination shapes such work. When we seek to plant new Churches, are the visions for these communities of faith influenced at all by the vision of a People created and nurtured by the communal practice of the *General Rules*? Here again, a more focused reflection on Methodist Peoplehood raises questions around the shape of new ecclesial community: are such communities formed to resemble the mega Church, the monastery, or something that leans both ways at once?

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have made the first constructive move in a Methodist ecclesiology and theology of evangelistic mission that is in but not of this world: I

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<sup>75</sup> See *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005).

<sup>76</sup> See Elaine Heath and Scott Kisker, *Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010).

asserted that Methodism is a People, and that such a designation informs Methodist ecclesial identity. I argued that, in addition to a Methodist concern to reflect Wesley's focus on the significant relationship of soteriology and anthropology, we must also include thicker ecclesiological reflection. In other words, we must think of the Church as more than the context or environment of soteriological mission. Considering the Church as a People and locating this understanding in the history of the early Methodist movement, I showed that such a community was formed from the practices embedded in Wesley's *General Rules* which led to the development of a visible, practicing, and witnessing People called Methodist.

In this way, within this study that seeks a theology of evangelism that leans both ways at once, this chapter intentionally has leaned just one way: into the history, theology, and practices that form a People called Methodist. In the desire to articulate a theology of evangelism resistant to the understatement of the Church-world difference, the concern for the identity and practices that render the Church a visible, practicing, and witnessing community are crucial. Yet, it is not enough to lean just one way.

Acknowledging the limitations that a vision of the Church as a People will have for a Methodist theology, not to mention the problematic possibility of overstatement of the Church-world differentiation in that theology, in the next chapter, I will complicate the theological identity of a Methodist People. In this frame, such a People are constantly appearing in the Church's constant, ongoing missional-evangelistic engagement with the world. Again, my hope is to build on Stone's gesture toward this location of the Church, by suggesting not only this Church's visual, aesthetic witness to the world, but also its

direct, embodied engagement with the world. Further, I will seek to articulate how this construction opens us to a reading of Methodism that relates this sense of Peoplehood to connectional identity, and to the Church's presence in congregation, school, clinic, and shelter. In other words, we must turn now to complicate our vision, and to seek an account of the Church and its missional-evangelistic practice that really does lean both ways at once.

## CHAPTER 5

*The truth incarnate, present in the human world, is instantly, inevitably, entangled with the luxuriant tendrils of human fantasy and self-deceit...There is no breaking-free from this web, because entanglement in it is inseparable from human being – the conditions of imperfect knowledge and imperfect communication, combined with the urge to structure and subdue the world and tame its contingency. And thus truth in this world is a stranger, essentially and profoundly vulnerable: its connection with or participation in the world involves rejection, crucifixion outside the city gates. Yet it has entered the world, it has allowed itself to be linked with the sphere of destructive untruth; and even if rejected, it cannot be annihilated.<sup>1</sup>*

### 5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, we considered Methodist identity as a “People,” a community formed from the practices embedded in Wesley’s *General Rules*, devotion to which led to the development of a visible, practicing, and witnessing People called Methodist. This constituted a step toward articulating the stance the Church takes in a theology of evangelistic mission—to borrow Yoder’s phrase, the Church is a “People in the world.”

Yet, this identification of the People called Methodist was only one step in a study that seeks to elucidate a theology of evangelism that leans both ways at once. The recognition of the visible, practicing, witnessing identity of the People called Methodist is critical to a theology of evangelism that maintains the differentiation of Church and world. But on its own, it is incomplete, as our account of formation still requires the critical connection to an account of evangelistic mission. In other words, Methodism might constitute a People in the world, but now we must ask: how does this People *engage* the world?

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel, Revised Edition* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 35.

Answering this question will require us to complicate the theological identity of a Methodist People. In this chapter, I will argue that a Methodist People is not only shaped in the practice of the *General Rules*, but also, at the same time, in the ongoing evangelistic engagement with the world. Put differently, I will suggest that a Methodist Peoplehood is constantly “appearing” and is “discovered” as it takes shape at the intersection of the Church and the world. Further, I will articulate how this image of an emerging People in the world opens us to the connection between this sense of Peoplehood and Methodist connectional identity, and more particularly, to the Church’s presence beyond the congregation. The People called Methodist engage the world in evangelistic mission in the local Church, to be sure, but also beyond the local Church, in the Conference, in schools, clinics, and shelters. In this sense, I offer a vision of Methodist ecclesial identity for the sake of evangelistic mission within the differentiation of Church and world, leaning both ways at once.

## **5.2 Difficulties in Seeking Ecclesiology that Leans Both Ways at Once**

We began this work in Chapter 3, considering the Church’s missional agency within the world in the work of John Howard Yoder. Displayed there was Yoder’s missionary theology, locating the Church-world relation in a Christological (Jesusological) frame within the order of redemption as the theological key to the development of the Church’s witness in mission. Because the Church is called to be a “People in the world,” embodying a mission to proclaim the gospel that is truly “good news” to a world hungry to hear (and to see) it, the Church cannot be collapsed into the



world. Neither can the Church seek to fulfill its mission by antiseptically sealing itself off from the world. However, with Yoder, we sought a more careful articulation of the shape of the missionary engagement between the two. Committed to the differentiation of Church and world, confessing faith in Christ as Lord of both, and understanding the normative source for ecclesial mission to be located “internally” within the order and practices of the Church, Yoder offers us the framework within which mission remains intelligible. He clarifies the shape of this engagement as he considers the Church’s relationship with the world in the practices of communal discernment and the “crafting” of the Church’s proclamation of the gospel, each pursuit judged faithful to the extent that the reflection of Jesus is continually revealed by the Church in the world. This engagement is the result of the “high Christology” that constitutes the proclamation of a “missionary ecclesiology” encountering a new and wider world. The mission of the Church is the Church called to be the Church, sent to be the Church, yet always located in, connected to, and engaged with the world.

Now, however, we must complicate this picture by acknowledging the fact that there may be some who do not see Yoder’s work in just this light.<sup>2</sup> From a Methodist perspective, Yoder’s account of the Church as a particular “People,” formed by particular practices (as described in *Body Politics*) and engaging the world in mission, can be read as positing an ontological vision of the distinction of Church and world, and an overly “territorialized” vision of each. Such readings, of course, are mistaken, inasmuch as they

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<sup>2</sup> Or those, we might add, who view the work of Bryan Stone in the same way, just to the extent that he relies so significantly on Yoder’s work in his own offerings within the theology and practice of evangelism. See Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).

ignore Yoder's clarification that the differentiation of Church and world is based not in ontology but agency. And as we have seen in chapters 2 and 3, Church and world exist together, but differ in the orientation of their agency. Yet I have also argued that this differentiation can sometimes tend to overstatement, leading to an overly firm identification of the Church over against, if not separated from, the world. Thus, we must ask whether it is possible that a focus on the "Peoplehood" of the Church is itself a construction that leads to an unfortunate overstatement of the Church-world difference.

Countering this possibility, I have tried to show that the identity of Methodism as a particular People is not foreign to the Methodist tradition. In the last chapter, I argued that a visible, practicing, and witnessing People called Methodist is a reality that Wesley helped to nurture through the provision of the *General Rules*. And, indeed, this self-identification of Methodist Peoplehood continued beyond Wesley's life. In their commentary on the *Discipline*, Asbury and Coke represent early American Methodism's articulation of this Peoplehood as the telos of Methodist missional identity, writing, "[O]ur one aim in all our economy and ministerial labours, is to raise a holy people, crucified to the world and alive to God," and "Our original design in forming our religious society... [is] [t]o raise a holy people... We will have a holy people, or none."<sup>3</sup> Such commitment has led Russell Richey to argue that early American Methodism can be described in "sectarian" terms...

...if we redefine the word to betoken a movement...critical of the principalities and powers of the world and of the worldliness that invaded individual lives in immoral, frivolous, undisciplined living; structured into

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, 10<sup>th</sup> ed.* (Philadelphia, PA: Hentry Tuckniss, 1798), 159.

small same-sex-groups that offered...new social relations and a new family...”<sup>4</sup>

The calling to be a People in the world was a crucial part of the identity of the Methodist movement in both England and in the newly formed United States of America.

In addition, this new People came to exist not for its own sake, nor solely to offer a winsome example of Christian living to a watching world. Rather, the People called Methodist pursued a more direct mission of engagement with the world. As Richey clarifies,

if [Methodists] preached and demanded of themselves an alternative lifestyle to that of the genteel world around them, then *they* also engaged the world in their preaching and preeminently in the quarterly meetings, seeking its transformation and certainly that of all who would listen.<sup>5</sup>

We will seek to develop this point more fully later in this chapter, but suffice it to say here that a Methodist Peoplehood actually leans both ways at once between the practices of formation and evangelistic mission, embodying the Methodist mission to “reform the continent and spread scriptural holiness over the land.”

The point is that this two-way leaning has not always been the case. We must also consider, briefly, the ways in which American Methodism supposedly moved beyond this identification as a so-called sectarian, holy People. One hundred years after Asbury and Coke’s articulation of Methodism as the calling of a holy People, American Methodism had turned decisively to welcome the “technique and technology of the times to meet the new day,” embracing an “aggressive, transformative, institution-creating

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<sup>4</sup> Russell Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2009), 163.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

spirit” that Richey describes as “denominational.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, the location of Methodist mission in institution and organization was not an American invention.<sup>7</sup> Still, in Britain and in America, as we see in Richey’s evaluation, the embrace of organizational structure and institutional arrangement in Methodism has often been interpreted as a turn away from its more local, sectarian roots. Rather than a holy People called Methodist embodied in the class and quarterly conference, so the argument goes, Methodism became known more clearly as an organization. Eventually, the connectional identity that had always marked the Methodist movement had developed in a way that named the increasingly complex networks of communication and institution that carried Methodist mission forward. In short, according to this account, “sect” gave way to “denomination.”

These two snapshots of American Methodist identity, as a holy People and as a Connection, get at the very problem we need to address in this chapter—namely, that there are two snapshots, or two separable accounts of Methodist identity and agency. It is right to argue that the Peoplehood embodied in the forms and practices of early British and American Methodism does not say everything necessary about Methodist ecclesial identity. From this perspective, to only emphasize Methodism as a People without adequate engagement with the story of the Methodist development of institutional identity is problematic. Indeed, a myopic view of Methodist ecclesial identity might overstate the Church-world distinction just to the extent that it neglects a full account of the ways the Church actually engaged the world as a sectarian People *and* as a set of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, consider Wesleyan Methodism’s establishment of the Kingswood School. Regarding the institution and history of the Kingswood School, see A.G. Ives, *Kingswood School in Wesley’s Day and Since* (London, UK: Epworth Press, 1970).

connectional organizations and institutions. At the same time it is also problematic that these accounts of Methodist ecclesial identity are posited against each other, such that institution and organization are construed as something other than being a People in evangelistic mission. Thus, part of our work in this chapter is to seek an account that does not construe this development of Methodist ecclesial identity and structure only in terms of declension. Thus, Richey is right, to privilege the snapshot of the Church in America offered in 1797 and to ignore the different picture we find in 1897 would be to tell just part of the story, instead of the fuller account: what was once a sect became a denomination. Constructively, we must go further to ask what a vision of the Church might look like if it were to embrace both for the sake of articulating evangelistic mission.

To further complicate matters, we must also consider what constitutes a third “snapshot” of Methodist ecclesial identity revealing movement not only from “sect” to “denomination,” but also from “denomination” to “congregation.” With the Centennial General Conference’s action in 1884 to allow the creation of local boards to meet and administrate within charges (between meetings of the quarterly conference), paired with the development of “Akron-Plan” Sunday School facilities in local congregations, the stage was set for the development of what was called the “institutional Church,” or in today’s parlance, the “local Church.”<sup>8</sup> By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this local

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<sup>8</sup> Richey, 214. Richey considers the “Methodist conceptual reorientation” in ecclesial identity to favor the “the local church,” and traces this reorientation through the Disciplines in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He notes that the concept of the local Church appeared as part of a larger section of the 1940 Discipline devoted to Conference identity and structures. However, after that, from 1944 to 1960, “The Local Church” became its own section in the Discipline (part two), separated from and inserted preceding part four, devoted to the Conference. In these later Disciplines, quarterly conferences ceased to be treated in part four, however, but appeared within part two, leading Richey to conclude that “‘The Local Church’ entirely subsumed the once

form of ecclesial identity merged with the “American predilection for local rule and principled congregationalism,” and became the norm to the point that today, “it just seems natural that local religious functions will center in a single congregation, ‘the local Church.’”<sup>9</sup> This remains the central image of the Church for American Methodists today, posed against a connectionalism that has been collapsed into concern for the boards and agencies of denominational bureaucracy. While the current statement of mission for the United Methodist Church makes plain the calling to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” it goes on to clarify that “local Churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, much of the focus within the theology of evangelism is disciplined by the assumption that evangelism is primarily a practice limited to the congregation or the local Church.

This reality further complicates the possible problem with emphasizing Methodist Peoplehood as a turn to emphasize the visible, practicing, witnessing People called Methodist, inasmuch as a claim to re-emphasize Methodist Peoplehood can be seen as underwriting the turn to the congregation, as opposed to the Methodist Connection. What we need, and thus, what this chapter seeks to offer, is an account of Methodist ecclesiology that takes seriously the dialectical character of Methodism as a People *and* as a Connection, but without falling into the trap of overemphasizing the congregationalism that currently threatens to overcome Methodist connectional identity and practice. In other words, we need an account of Methodist ecclesial identity and

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regional quarterly conference.” The move to emphasize locality and congregation over Church was, in some ways, complete.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2008* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), Part III, Section 1, Para. 120., p. 87.

practice that leans both ways at once, between Peoplehood and Connection, between movement and institution, between local/regional and global/universal, allowing that each inform, shape, and guide Methodist evangelistic mission.

### **5.3 Complicating Peoplehood, Church and World: Rowan Williams**

As a step toward a constructive account of Methodist ecclesial identity and evangelistic mission, in what follows, I seek to move beyond these potential problems named above: that the rendering of the Church as a People can tend to “territorialize” Church and world in a way that leads to an overstatement of their differentiation and that, consequently, undermines an account of evangelistic mission. Against such an overcorrection, on the way to offering an explicitly Methodist missional ecclesiology, I draw our attention to the theological vision of Rowan Williams. Williams, as we shall see, is uncomfortable with the overly determinative separation of Church and world, but not to the degree that he is willing to abandon an account of the evangelistic engagement between the two.

A word is necessary here concerning the choice to turn to Williams as an instructive voice for a theology of Methodist evangelistic mission. Having listened carefully to the witness of John Howard Yoder in previous chapters, I hope that the turn to Williams makes more sense. In his own way, each thinker wonders what it means to say that the Church lives and serves “in the world,” but is called to be not “of the world.” Neither would accept the Church’s collapse into the world, but both would resist an overstated account of the necessary difference between the two. Perhaps this

commonality exists between them, as a concern for the Church in mission is a common denominator for their work.<sup>11</sup>

However, I am drawn to Williams and Yoder together not simply because they share some theological commitments but, rather, because they are so differently located from one another ecclesially. Yoder, of course, spoke from within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, a fact which renders intelligible his call to the Church to remember its identity as an elected “peoplehood,” the gospel itself embodied in a visible, practicing, witnessing body of disciples.<sup>12</sup> His influence upon the Church’s self-understanding has been made evident in prior chapters, where I have sought to articulate Peoplehood as a key aspect of Methodist ecclesial identity. But as I have argued so far in this chapter, Methodist ecclesial identity cannot be solely located in a holy People, inasmuch as the historical record in both England and America complicate that claim. Methodism is a People, but it is a People embodied in a variety of movements, organizations, and institutions, the relationships between which we describe as connectional. Given this complexity, we ask in what ways do these instantiations of Methodist presence continue the presence of the Church in the world?

Williams is a significant voice at this point, speaking as he does as a theologian who so obviously wrestles with difficult questions rising from the difficult intersection of ecclesial establishment and the crucified Jesus. As we will see, Williams himself

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<sup>11</sup> Certainly, this connection is evident in Nathan Kerr’s *Christ, History and Apocalyptic*, where Kerr directly engages Yoder and draws from Williams in his last chapter, articulating an “apocalyptic politics of mission.” See Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Of course, this fact reflects the argument in chapters 3 and 4 that Wesleyan Methodism reflects this calling. The development of a People called Methodist was the result of Wesley’s development in early Methodism of the societies, bands, and classes guided by the formation of his “*General Rules of the United Societies*.”



struggles with what it means to be counted within this Peoplehood and engaged with the world. On the one hand, he resists the triumphalism endemic to a Church that lives in unquestioned relationship to the political and economic powers and principalities of modern states and markets. Yet, equally important is the fact that Williams does not retreat from the establishment of the Church, nor from the concomitant responsibility to inhabit that space and to speak to the world(s) of politics, economics, culture, and art—as he has done in so many of his works. In navigating these relationships, Williams shows himself to be a theologian who lives within the dialectical complexity of life in both Church and world. In this way, he and Yoder both speak to the Church as it pursues evangelistic mission in the world, inasmuch as both attend to what it means to “lean both ways at once.”<sup>13</sup>

This chapter will display some moves and sensibilities in Williams’ theology in order to add nuance, complexity, and perhaps even some ambiguity to the relationship of Church and world, while perhaps simultaneously finding within this complex, nuanced ambiguity the location of evangelistic-missional engagement between the Church and the world. However, rather than positing a clear set of ecclesial marks that might be utilized to describe only a materially locatable Church, Williams’s vision destabilizes the effort to identify the spatially oriented ontology of the Church, and allows for a much more fluid, less “territorial” approach. Inasmuch as this vision impacts his understanding of Church

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<sup>13</sup> At the same time, it must also be said that Williams and Yoder differ from one another in important ways, particularly regarding their assumptions about the constitution of intra-ecclesial authority and ministry (including issues of ordination) and sacramental theology and practice, just to name two. Their inclusion here is not an argument for a particular reading of either or both together, but rather, a positioning that stands, from a United Methodist perspective, as a theological “leaning both ways at once.” Indeed, it is a Wesleyan theological virtue to draw deeply from theological traditions within the Church catholic despite their larger differentiations, not in an effort to reconcile or rectify such divisions, but rather, to inform and empower the theology and practice of evangelistic mission.

and world, it also affects his understanding of the missional relationship between them, as we shall see. The evangelistic mission of the Church, then, can only be the constant movement of the Church from the memory of its past to the interrogation of its present, and from repentance of its sin to the world of “division and competition” within which the offer of the unrestricted communion of the Trinitarian life reflected and enacted in Jesus can be heard as *good news*. Thus, it is hoped that from Yoder and from Williams, we will find the resources with which to express the theological differentiation of Church and world, as well as the meaning of missional engagement, without obviating the true “messiness” of life simultaneously lived in Church and world, or overstating a pristine ontological, “territorial” status for the Church.

### **5.3.1 The Inescapability of the World: Always “In the Middle of Things”**

One imagines that the Archbishop of Canterbury does not think of the Church as entirely separable from the world; from a position of authority within an Erastian Church, such overstated separation can hardly be an imaginable reality. Yet, it also cannot be assumed that Williams believes the Church to be faithful when it lives unquestioningly within its establishment. Instead, as he makes clear in his introduction to the essays in his compiled volume, *On Christian Theology*, Williams’s theological approach, inasmuch as it always assumes that its work begins “in the middle of things,” is constantly operating in the unstable, ambiguous space between the Church and the world.<sup>14</sup> It is, in fact,

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<sup>14</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), xii. Williams argues that theology is at once “communicative” and “critical” (as well as “celebratory” throughout), which is to say that it is attentive to cultural, linguistic practices both inside and outside the Church. The communicative dynamic leads theology to seek “experiment[ation] with the rhetoric of its uncommitted

difficult to find much explicit reflection in Williams' work on the *distinction* or the *differentiation* of the Church and the world. Rather, he speaks of their relationship as *angular* or *parabolic*.<sup>15</sup> He suggests that the Church exists as a community "at an angle to the forms of human association we treat as natural," not disconnected from those forms of life, but simultaneously connected, and yet still differentiated, entering the relationship from a different direction, and yet, still as a "context which relativizes all others."<sup>16</sup>

Already we can begin to see that Williams maps out a space between Church and world that cannot be inhabited without some tension; as he puts it, "this paradox is a hard one to live out."<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, the Church must exist in some sense as a sectarian body, a particular People, for

...if we are to keep on learning about Christ, then at the very least the Church needs practices, conventions and life-patterns that keep alive the distinctiveness of the Body... To use the heavily loaded language common in these discussions; a church which does not at least possess certain features of a 'sect' cannot act as an agent of transformation.<sup>18</sup>

However, this does not mean, in any sense, that the Church must take on all features of a 'sect,' and thus seek to overstate the material distance between it and the

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environment," believing that such an interaction can (and more confidently, will) lead to the expression of the Gospel in ways that are both new and faithful. However, the achievement of faithfulness in this communicative endeavor is gained through theology's attention to critical discourse—the "nagging at fundamental meanings" that keeps theology faithful to its source across time. To call all of this "celebratory" clarifies that for Williams, the focus for this work is not only theological discourse within the academy, but rather, within the Church, and even more specifically, for the achievement of faithful practice of worship and prayer.

<sup>15</sup> "Theology should be equipping us for the recognition of and response to the parabolic in the world—all that resists the control of capital and administration and hints at or struggles to a true sharing of human understanding, in art, science and politics. It should also equip us to act parabolically as Christians, to construct in our imagining and our acting 'texts' about conversion—not translations of doctrines into digestible forms, but effective images of a new world like the parables of Christ." Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

world. To do this would be a mistake, Williams argues, inasmuch as such a move treats “...people as if they were not deeply and permanently moulded by their natural and unchosen belonging, to a family or a language group or a political system.”<sup>19</sup> Such an assumption is “manifestly damaging and illusory,” as “the persons who are involved in the community of the Kingdom are not ‘new creations’ in the sense of having all their relationships and affiliations cancelled.”<sup>20</sup> Rather, we always begin where we are, and with what we have: languages, cultures, practices, relationships, and so on. As created, we are part of creation; we are in the world. Thus, the search for such a space separated from the multiple and overlapping communities that constitute our social lives is a search for something that does not exist, because we always begin “in the middle of things.”

And so, as a result, Williams suggests that

The question thus becomes how existing patterns of belonging can collaborate with the patterns of new community, if at all, how the goals and priorities of these existing patterns are to be brought together with the constructive work of the Kingdom, the Body.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, he asks how we can navigate Christian existence between Church and world, leaning both ways at once.

Here, we can begin to see themes similar to those which we discovered in Yoder’s work, and which come to bear on a faithful Methodist account of the Church’s evangelistic relationship to the world in mission. Because the Church is not the world but is sent in mission to the world, and is located “in the middle of things,” the paradoxical stance that the Church takes calls for acts of discernment and proclamation that may take

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 235-236.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 236.

the form of potential cooperation between the Church and elements of the world. As Williams writes,

The work continues, for the theologian and the Church at large, of discerning and naming the Christ-like events of liberation and humanization in the world *as* Christ-like, and, at the level of action, expressing this hermeneutical engagement in terms of concrete practical solidarity.<sup>22</sup>

It should be noted how similar this assertion is to what we have found in Yoder's work, inasmuch as Williams joins Yoder in suggesting that the ongoing missional task of the Church is to discern and to name the movements in the world that reflect Christ-like ends, a task that Williams calls a "hermeneutical engagement." As we have seen in Yoder's writing, the "discerning and naming" work of the Church leads to opportunities for "tactical alliances," or in Williams' terms, "concrete practical solidarity." Conversely, such naming may lead to explicit renunciation, which itself constitutes a missional expression of public witness. All of this becomes unintelligible without an account of the distinction of the Church and the world. This is the work of a People in the world and is crucial for the account of ecclesial evangelism developing here.

### **5.3.2 Troubling Church, World, and the Space Between**

But it is here that Williams troubles these categories as we have deployed them so far. Williams suggests that discernment describes not only the practice of determining potential collaborative efforts between Church and world, but also the determination of the Church itself. In other words, the Church's density and visibility is discovered not upon reflection on its relationship with the wider world, but rather, when the Church is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 142-143.

engaged in the world. In Williams's work, this move appears in the process of eschewing overly fixed terms to describe the Church's identity and agency. Rather than positing a clear set of ecclesial marks that might be utilized to describe a materially locatable Church, Williams's vision destabilizes the effort to identify the spatially oriented ontology of the Church and allows for a much more fluid, less territorial approach. Inasmuch as this vision impacts his understanding of Church and world, it also affects his understanding of the missional relationship between them, as we shall see. In examining this vision, we will consider the ways in which Williams places any sense of a fixed ecclesiology in check, and then we will move on to explain how he conceives of the appearance of the Church in the world. We will begin by noting that Williams makes clear his concern for any territorial understanding of the Church's relationship to the world in his essay, "The Judgment of the World," where he critiques the intratextual project of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*.<sup>23</sup> We shall also see how such a perspective is grounded in his theological interpretation of both the sinfulness of the Church and the significance of history.

In "The Judgment of the World," Williams argues that Lindbeck's offering constitutes an overdetermination of the relationship between scripture and world, inasmuch as it treats each of these categories as forms of fixed "territory," the latter being consumed by the former.<sup>24</sup> Thus, seeking to destabilize what he sees as an overdetermined and unidirectional relationship between text and world, Williams

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<sup>23</sup> Rowan Williams, "The Judgement of the World," in *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 29-43.

<sup>24</sup> See similar critiques made by See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997) and Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

emphasizes that the scripture is not a “clear and readily definable territory,” but is, rather, “an *historical* world in which meanings are discovered and recovered in action and encounter.”<sup>25</sup> The Church is both guided by and interrogated by the text, and thus, lives each new moment as a potential discovery of itself and the world along this “edge.” Thus, on the one hand, this intersection of Church and world is “a generative moment in which there may be a *discovery* of what the primal text may become (and so of what it *is*) as well as a discovery of the world.”<sup>26</sup> But on the other hand, it is also a moment of discovery for the Church itself, regarding itself: “the interpretation of the world ‘within the scriptural framework’ is intrinsic to the *Church’s* critical self-discovery... In judging the world, by its confrontation of the world with its own dramatic script, the Church also judges itself...”<sup>27</sup> Williams’s use of the term *generative* is helpful here, inasmuch as it makes room for the creative work of the Spirit at this critical intersection; as the Church engages the world, the Church is re-created, and discovers itself.

Consequently, Williams can join Yoder in naming the fact that the shape of the Church’s proclamation to the world cannot be determined a priori: “At any point in its history, the Church needs both the confidence that it has a gospel to preach, and the ability to see that it cannot readily specify in advance how it will find words for preaching in particular new circumstances.”<sup>28</sup> But this reticence to determine the shape of the Church’s speech to the world is grounded not only in the endless diversity of contexts that constitute “world,” but also in the inability to predetermine the ways in

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<sup>25</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 30, emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

which the Church itself will discover itself and be shaped along that edge of engagement. So, undoubtedly for Williams, the Church enters into the work of “constructing meanings,” and thus, must be involved in the broader conversations of “art and politics in the widest sense of those words...”<sup>29</sup> But even more, what is at stake is not just the judgment of the world by the Church through the lens of the scriptural text, but also the necessary development within the Church of “a new self-identification, a new self-description, in the categories of Christian prayer and sacrament,” that will be both “possible and intelligible” in each particular intersection of Church and world.<sup>30</sup> So conceived, it will not be wrong to describe this scenario as a kind of conversion, inasmuch as it reflects a transformation equally applicable to the discoveries made in both world and Church.<sup>31</sup> In short, the Church is called to engage with the world in order to “*rediscover* our own foundational story in the acts and hopes of others,” so that “we ourselves are converted and are also able to bring those acts and hopes in relation with Christ for their fulfillment by the re-creating grace of God.”<sup>32</sup>

This story must be “rediscovered,” of course, because the Church consistently shows the signs of having forgotten it. This is to say that, for Williams, the Church’s pursuit of evangelistic mission in the world will be guided not only by the practices of discernment, but also by repentance and confession. We can detect an echo of this assertion in Yoder’s work, as he argues that the self-corrective humility of the Christian

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> As Williams puts it, “The Christian is involved in seeking conversion—the bringing to judgment of contemporary struggles, and the appropriation of some new dimension of the transforming summons of Christ in his or her own life.” Ibid., 33.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 38, emphasis in original.



community is itself a way to reveal to the world the identity of the suffering servant.<sup>33</sup> Such confession and repentance do not undercut mission, but display the Church in mission, inasmuch as the self-corrective humility of the Christian community is in and of itself witness to the world. Yet, Williams seems to push this idea further, again in order to suggest the crucial relationship of repentance and confession as missional practices not only of the Church witnessing to the world, but of the Church's determination and identification vis-à-vis the world. For Williams, the discernment of sin in the world is also the confession of sin from within the Church, for "[i]f it is to be itself, it has no option but to live in penitence, in critical self-awareness and acknowledgement of failure. It must recognize constantly its failing *as* a community to *be* a community of gift and mutuality, and warn itself of the possibility of failure."<sup>34</sup> This allegation pushes us to understand the ways in which this task requires historical reflection.

Like Yoder's naming of the "agents of memory," who participate in the discernment guided by the hermeneutics of Peoplehood, Williams also suggests that the Church's engagement with the world must be partly framed as a historical task. In *Why Study the Past?*, Williams argues that it has become common for theological appropriations of history to utilize an interpretive framework that in some sense seeks to reach back beyond eras of distorted doctrine or practice to periods of greater coherence and faithfulness that can then be deployed for purposes of modern/contemporary

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<sup>33</sup> John Howard Yoder, "The Disavowal of Constantine: An Alternative Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 250-251.

<sup>34</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel, Revised Edition* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 48-49, emphasis in original.

reconstruction of faithful practice.<sup>35</sup> This approach is not patently wrong, Williams argues, as “to relate the story of the Christian Church is always—at least for the Christian—to look for a ‘plot’ in the record.”<sup>36</sup> But the ‘plot’ he seeks to reveal is profoundly unsettling: “Christian faith has its beginnings in an experience of profound contradictoriness, an experience that so questioned the religious categories of its time that the resulting organization of religious language was a centuries-long task.”<sup>37</sup> Because of this reality, Williams sees the work of history in theology defined not so much by “our interrogation of the data,” but rather, by “its interrogation of us.”<sup>38</sup> This work focuses on the ways, over time, in which Christian identity has been formed at the intersections of the “creatively new become manifest in human articulation” and “the hidden God, *Deus absconditus*, who has made his transcendence known in the darkness of a death.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, Williams is able to suggest that “[g]ood historical writing... is writing that constructs that sense of who we are by real engagement with the strangeness of the past... The end product is a sense of who we are now that is subtle enough to encompass the things we don’t fully understand.”<sup>40</sup> This last phrase, perhaps, captures Williams’ non-territorial sense of the Church’s identity. Under interrogation by the strangeness of its past, repentantly confessing its sins along the way, discerning the generative movement of the Spirit at the intersection of the Church and the world, the Church has a “subtle” sense of

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<sup>35</sup> Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 22-23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross, Second, Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), 11.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Here Williams quotes from Cornelius Ernst, O.P., “World Religions and Christian Theology,” *New Blackfriars*, Nov. 1969, 732. See Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 189.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Why Study the Past?*, 24.

itself, and thus, comes to face, and perhaps to find itself anew amidst, the “things we don’t fully understand.” This process is the Church living and leaning between tradition and innovation, both ways at once.

While this vision goes some distance toward showing us a more complicated picture of the People of the Church in relation to the world, it is still ecclesiology formed along the *via negativa*, exercising care not to overstate our speech about this particular People’s identity or agency in relationship to the world. Can we say more? How shall we identify the Church when it does appear at this intersection with the world? On our way toward developing a Methodist ecclesiology for the sake of an account of missional evangelism, I continue to employ Williams, who suggests that the Church is identified less by its reflection of certain “marks,” and more by its appearance as a community of gift and mutuality when engaged in the discovery of the other in forgiveness and reconciliation.

### **5.3.3 Church in the Breathing Spaces: Engaging the Other in Reconciliation and Forgiveness**

In Rowan Williams’s reflections on the terrorist attacks in the United States, *Writing in the Dust*, he suggests the vital need for a kind of vulnerable openness between peoples that he calls “breathing space.” In the breathing space, Williams argues that we might

become conscious, as people often do, of two very fundamental choices. We can cling harder and harder to the rock of our threatened identity—a choice, finally, for self-delusion over truth; or we can accept that we shall have *no* ultimate choice but to let go, and in that letting go, give room to what’s there around us—to the sheer impression of the moment, to the need of the person next to you, to the fear that needs to be looked at, acknowledged and calmed

(not denied). If that happens, the heart has room for many strangers, near and far.<sup>41</sup>

While not explicitly addressing an ecclesiological question here, Williams does point to a kind of space where the Church might also be said to “appear,” not as a fixed entity, but more as an event, and even more specifically, as an event of reconciliation and forgiveness. This is the generative move toward community, where “the heart has room for many strangers.”

The generation of this community is not a human responsibility, at least not primarily, inasmuch as Williams roots this generativity within the relationship of giving and receiving at the heart of the Triune God, revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, we come to see that

God’s creative act as in itself a giving away, a letting go; and because the giving away of Jesus is itself a response to the giving God whom Jesus calls *Abba*, we learn that God’s act includes both a giving and a responding, that God’s life is itself in movement and in relation with itself. . . . Jesus is the fleshly and historical form of God’s act of giving in its responsive dimension—God’s answer to God, the embodiment of God’s own joy in God.<sup>42</sup>

This vision is centrally important to understanding Williams on the nature of the Church’s relationship to the world in evangelistic mission. The nature of God, the “everlasting motion of the divine life,” is the “will to give,” a movement captured in the creedal affirmation, “begotten of the Father before all ages.”<sup>43</sup> God’s eternal existence in the life of gift and communion finds expression in the sending of the Son into time, into

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<sup>41</sup> Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 59-60.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 234.

<sup>43</sup> Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), 223.

history, where the Son seeks the “making of communion.”<sup>44</sup> What we find in Jesus is the unique expression of God’s will, a “human identity shaped wholly by the divine purpose of reconciliation through communion.”<sup>45</sup> In Jesus, God inaugurates a new kind of “belonging together,” creating a Peoplehood extended beyond the limits of Israel alone, and centered in the radical hospitality that Jesus offers to all in the creation of a new community not subject to the “oppressive powers of the present world order,” but opened as a new possibility for human togetherness.<sup>46</sup> In time, the pursuit of this reconciliation through communion, this new possibility for human togetherness, is what we call the Church.

However, we can already see why these theological commitments will not fall prey to overstating the differentiation of Church and world. While there is no question that the particular sort of “human belonging” that Jesus embodies and creates represents a vision of a particular Peoplehood “more comprehensive than any existing form of human connectedness, race, kindred, or *imperium*,” it is a vision unrealized unless it continually extends itself as a possibility for human relations in the world.<sup>47</sup> Thus, there will be a Church, a community of the Body of Christ, only where a new social wholeness is created in the generative work of the Triune God extending the giving and receiving of forgiveness and reconciliation. This is what we see in Jesus, as the expression in time of God’s inner life. As such, Jesus cannot but reveal the continual movement toward that which reflects God’s very nature. In Williams’s words, this is “unrestricted

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Rowan Williams, *Mission and Christology: J.C. Jones Memorial Lecture* (Church Missionary Society, Welsh Council, 1994), 15.

<sup>47</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 233.

communion.”<sup>48</sup> The Peoplehood of the Church is a Peoplehood always developing, always growing, extending itself to reach, in Yoder’s phrase, “the other half of the reconciling event.”<sup>49</sup>

We can also see at this point how the notion of this always-developing Peoplehood gestures toward the development of a missional, and deeply evangelistic, ecclesiology, inasmuch as a Church understood in the terms of “unrestricted communion” can never be seen as complete. There will be a Church, but as Williams notes, it will be “...a church constantly chafing at its historical limits and failures, drawn toward the universality of communion it celebrates and proclaims in its eucharist.”<sup>50</sup> This is the case, because this reconciliation and forgiveness proclaimed refers not to the eternal memory of the acquittal of events that reside entirely in the past, but refers, rather, to the fact that such reconciliation and forgiveness are socially located and communally embodied. This reconciliation is always being unveiled, constantly extended and discovered as persons previously separated are brought together in this holistic way.

In this light, it is unsurprising that Williams suggests that mission (and by extension, the Church’s evangelism) cannot be considered outside of either the Kingdom of God or the catholicity of the Church. Because the confession of Jesus as Lord acknowledges Lordship over all creation, it is to all creation that the Church is drawn to serve in mission and evangelism. From this perspective, it becomes

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<sup>48</sup> Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 224.

<sup>49</sup> John Howard Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus: The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth,” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 55.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 224.

possible to see how both catholicity and mission are dimensions of the Church's form of life, a life endlessly sensitive, contemplatively alert to human personal and cultural diversity, tirelessly seeking new horizons in its own experience and understanding by engaging with this diversity, searching to see how the gospel is to be lived and confessed in new and unfamiliar situations; and doing this because of its conviction that each fresh situation is already within the ambience of Jesus' cross and resurrection, open to his agency, under his kingship."<sup>51</sup>

The Church surely exists in a distinct way vis-à-vis the world, enacting a relationship that helps to constitute mission—but mission cannot be separated from catholicity, Williams argues. The cooperative movement of mission and catholicity means that the “incalculable variety of human concerns can be ‘at home’ in and with the confession of faith in Jesus.”<sup>52</sup> Consequently, catholicity and mission aim “only to keep open and expanding the frontiers of the community of gift” and the extension of unrestricted communion.<sup>53</sup>

Consequently, we must also clarify that this movement describes a sacramental community. Williams will say that the goal for the extension of this unrestricted communion is the creation of a “visible community, the tangible reality of the sacramental fellowship that is entrusted with the communication of the good news,” a description which again suggests a community with density.<sup>54</sup> However, the offer of the sacramental life is not the offer of the gift of Jesus as if he were a possession of the Church to give. Rather, the Church's liturgy is itself a “leaning in both ways,” as it is at once a witness to the world of the Church's “continuity” with the community that bears his name, as well as a sign of the Church's “awareness” that it has not “mastered” Jesus,

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<sup>51</sup> Williams, *Resurrection*, 56-57.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Williams, *Mission and Christology*, 20.

.and accordingly, Williams writes, “never shall, since it is always [Jesus] who continues to invite, in the pulpit, or at the table or at the font.”<sup>55</sup>

This is why the Church as a People must engage the world, in Williams’ terms, “open to judgment.” The Church embodies an evangelical stance vis-à-vis the world as a sacramental community that leans both ways. The Church practices discernment, engaging memory, history, confession and repentance not as an intra-ecclesial practice, or as an individualized spiritual discipline, but instead, as openness to the many places, peoples, and stories through which God communicates judgment and generates the possibility of “unrestricted communion.”<sup>56</sup> Evangelistic mission, then, can only be the constant movement of the Church from the memory of its past to the interrogation of its present, and from repentance of its sin to the world of “division and competition” within which the offer of the unrestricted communion of the Trinitarian life, reflected and enacted first in Jesus and now in his body, can be discovered as *good news*.

#### **5.4 Rowan Williams and John Howard Yoder: Leaning Both Ways at Once**

As I have already started to point out, I believe that this reading of Williams helps us to see some similar themes in Yoder’s work, and that together, both thinkers help us in our search for a missional ecclesiology that is able to lean both ways at once. For Williams, as we have seen, Church appears less in terms of locatable, “territorial” space, and more in terms of an unfolding movement and event, appearing in places where “unrestricted communion” is achieved, as evidenced by the presence of relationships created or renewed in reconciliation and forgiveness. Thus, despite the fact that we can

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>56</sup> Williams, *Resurrection*, 46. He writes, “Only a penitent Church can manifest forgiven-ness.”



find Williams arguing for some distinction between the nature of the Church and the world, it becomes evident that for Williams, the Church cannot be the Church without its engagement with the world. Along this particular edge, at these points of intersection, perhaps the Church can be said to “appear” or “emerge,” as it becomes visible in the form of a sacramental community of reconciliation, unimaginable without the generative gift of God in Christ through the Spirit.

On this issue, we trust that Williams would agree with Yoder, who, as we have seen, when considering the nature of the gospel, suggests that the Church is always called to mission aimed at the world, a mission that constitutes the “other half of the reconciling event.”<sup>57</sup> The Church can never be adequately considered a “ghetto,” inasmuch as the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation requires that the people of God carry it to any and all “others.” But perhaps more forcefully in Yoder’s work, we find a concern for what we might call the “epistemic primacy” of the Church. Here, he draws from Barth to suggest that the Church exists as “first fruits” of the unfolding Kingdom of God, the community that in its own order and practice is a prefiguring of the eschatological victory. Consequently, as we tried to show in the last chapter, Yoder’s concern even in consideration of the Church’s mission drew deeply from reflection upon the internal order and practice of the Church itself—the Church *being* the Church. Of course, we remember that this reflection must be grounded in Yoder’s clear commitment to the order of the Church as dependent on the Lord in whose name it is formed and after whose example it continues to live: Jesus. The non-resistant, kenotic Lord of Church and world is the source for the “Jesusology” that informs both the constitution of the Church and the

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<sup>57</sup> John Howard Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” 55.

expression of its mission in the world (themes that cannot be separated from one another in Yoder's work).

Still, read along side of Williams, we can detect themes in Yoder's work that suggest a similar location of the Church—different from, but located in its engagement with the world. While I argued that Yoder clearly draws attention to forms of engagement with the world within the normativity of the community, I believe he also offers an understanding of ecclesial identity grounded in a non-territorial “peoplehood” that is constantly *discovered* in the missional engagement of Church and world. As we have seen, Yoder draws attention to the nature of the Church as defined by the gospel of reconciliation, witnessed in the creation of a new people inclusive of both Jews and Gentiles. “The work of God,” he writes, “is the calling of a people, whether in the Old Covenant or the New.”<sup>58</sup> However, I believe that along with Williams, Yoder would be concerned about the possibility of such claims for peoplehood leading to the potential overstatement of ecclesial identity vis-à-vis the world. Yoder's sense of “peoplehood” demonstrates a “missionary” character. Consideration of the order and constitution of the Church itself, as a reconciled and reconciling people, cannot be separated from the Church's proclamation of the gospel message; essentially, the Church *is* that message. Thus, the Church cannot but engage the world, inasmuch as such engagement in mission is integral to the definition of the Church itself. In this sense, for Yoder as well as for Williams, the Church is always an ongoing work, unfolding in time and over time, and appearing wherever this new social wholeness emerges in the world; in short, this

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<sup>58</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 46.

reconciliation between people in the world is mission, it is the gospel, and thus, where it appears, there is also the Church.

While the detection of these common themes amid the work of different theologians concerning the identity of Church and the relation of Church and world may be interesting, it takes on more significance in relationship to the larger purpose of this chapter and this dissertation. My intent is to reflect on this relationship of ecclesial location and reconciling presence in the world in light of the work of constructing a theology of evangelism, particularly for the Methodist tradition. Our engagement with Yoder and Williams has led us to articulate ecclesial identity in terms that lean both ways at once, finding Church in the particularity and visibility of a holy People formed and sustained by a sacramental life and, *at the same time*, finding Church in the continual missional-evangelistic engagement with the world.

Now we must turn to ask, if this is where the Church can be found, leaning both ways at once, what then might this mean for the practice of evangelism? And how might this illuminate a specifically Methodist account of ecclesial evangelism? In other words, how does the vision of the Church as a “People” at the intersection of Church and world, living in a “bounded openness,” taking shape in the engagement with “the other half of the reconciling event,” reflect and inform Methodist identity and practice? In what follows, I will suggest that we can learn, again, from Rowan Williams, to envision the Church’s ongoing engagement with the world in evangelistic mission as a kind of “intercession.” Intercession describes the missional evangelism of the Church’s engagement with the world. Subsequently, I will argue that this understanding of the

Church as a People leaning both ways at once requires us to thicken our account of Methodist ecclesiology. Rather than only locating such Peoplehood within the congregation, we must widen the aperture to include a variety of embodiments through which the Church engages the world. Inevitably, this expansion will lead us to consider how a Methodist ecclesiology leans both ways when, embodying intercessory evangelism and mission, it emphasizes its connectional, conferencing identity as it constitutes a People always engaging the world.

### **5.5 Engagement Between Church and World: Evangelism as Intercession**

First, I turn again to Rowan Williams, in his article, “Being a People: Reflections on the Concept of the ‘Laity.’”<sup>59</sup> There, Williams draws our focus to the priestly vocation of the people of God in Church and world by framing it as the calling to practice “intercession,” or to intercede, with others in the world, and with God. He begins by drawing from the insights of both William Stringfellow and Dumitru Staniloae to suggest that “before ever we ask what ‘the laity’ can or should be doing in the Church, we have to address the question of what the Church, the nation of the baptised, does; and this in turn depends upon having a clear answer to the question of what *Christ* does.”<sup>60</sup> At the beginning, such a turn reflects prior conversations regarding the identity of the Church as tied to Jesus and, inevitably, to the giving and receiving of the Triune God. This conversation (?) is necessary to our account of the evangelistic task, because as Williams

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<sup>59</sup> Rowan Williams, “Being a People: Reflections on the Concept of the ‘Laity,’” *Religion, State, and Society* 27 (1999): 11-21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

reminds us, “Without this christological and trinitarian focus, all that is said theologically about the laity is likely to reduce itself to recommendations for good works.”<sup>61</sup>

Reflecting themes discussed in Chapter 2 of this project, Williams first turns to Stringfellow for the reminder that the Church describes a particular People “called above all to be a *holy* nation, exactly as was Israel, in the sense that the Church is summoned to show what a nation *might* be.”<sup>62</sup> Not, then, a calling to holiness addressed to a select few, the vocation of the Church, according to Stringfellow, is to reflect the truth that all human beings are called “to belong together in justice,” and thus, the Church is called to be “the priest of nations.”<sup>63</sup> Yet, Williams is aware of the fact that such an emphasis can lead to the overstatement of the Church-world difference. Thus, he goes on to clarify, using Stringfellow, that the Church’s priestly calling is embodied in the ways in which the Church not only “shows” the world this potential, but also undertakes “what he calls ‘advocacy’ on behalf of every human victim...”<sup>64</sup> In other words, the Church must lean both ways: into the holiness of its identity, but also into the world, in a mission of advocacy.

Of course, the use of such a word as “advocacy” to describe the Church’s engagement with the world may appear problematic, to the extent that it is so often used in ways entirely separated from any theological, ecclesial grounding. It is resistance to exactly this kind of severance, however, that we find in Williams’s use of Stringfellow. For when the Church engages the world, and particularly when it stands with the world’s

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

victims, the Church does so as an expression of “its own experience of God’s victory over death...in conscious and articulate gratitude for God’s ability to take us beyond death.”<sup>65</sup> Consequently, such engagement cannot be defined on the world’s terms, but is, Williams argues, a matter of praise and worship. This vision emphasizes the priestly role of the Church among all nations, describing, now in Stringfellow’s words, “the Church which presents and represents in its corporate life creation restored in celebration of the World of God; the Church in which the vocation of worship and advocacy signifies the renewed vocation of every creature.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, whether gathered at the table or standing with the victim, the Church is always engaged in both worship and advocacy.

Williams takes this insight even further, drawing this reflection on the engagement of God’s People with the wider world into a theological account of God at work in the world, so that any description of the *laos* and the pursuit of their vocation is also a description of a divine action. More specifically, such divine action takes particular shape in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that create the Church, understood not only as those “summoned to be *with* Jesus, but more significantly...those who are called to participate in what Jesus *does*,” an role that is discovered specifically in his “givenness” or “attentiveness” to the Father.<sup>67</sup> This understanding takes Stringfellow’s insight even deeper, naming the fact that the *laos* will live a priestly life in the Church and in the world actually “caught up” in the divine action embodied in “sacrifice.”

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience* (Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1977), 102. Quoted by Williams, “Being a People,” 13.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Belonging to a priestly people means the absorption in one's life of the pattern of Christ's life. Utter attentiveness to the Father, an attentiveness that takes us strangely beyond any graspable picture of the divine source, demands the sacrifice of the God we can control. And as such it entails the willingness to be open to God in any and every situation, including and especially situations of apparent Godlessness. By sustaining such an openness, there is a sort of bringing of the situation to God, or at least a *naming* of the God present already. This naming and offering is the priestly task of the people, their sacrifice of praise.<sup>68</sup>

Recalling Williams's description of the Church considered above, we should note the ways in which this vision echoes the sense of the Church as reflecting the identity of Jesus in history, himself reflecting the ongoing giving and receiving within the divine life. In time, in its attentive relationship toward God and the world around it, the Church continues to build what Jesus began to create: unrestricted communion.

Connecting the advocacy and worship of the Church to ongoing divine action in the world is the prelude necessary for Williams to introduce his other theological conversation partner in this article, the Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae, and specifically, Staniloae's conception of the Christian's relationship with the world, described best as *Responsibility*. Because the People of God define their engagement with the world within the ongoing divine action of God in the world, and among those not yet within the Church, their responsibility is to

listen for the word of God that is there, and [then] struggle to 'speak' it afresh for ourselves, drawing it into the task of shaping *human* meanings. In this sense, we make answer for creation to God; we try to 'name' what is before us in such a way that God's action moves in our act and speech.<sup>69</sup>

However, this task is not just self-serving, for the good of the Church, but is action undertaken for the world: "*Our* response to another person is part of God's enabling of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 14.

*their* response, and so of their fulfilled life.”<sup>70</sup> Put differently, we might say that this response constitutes a sort of proclamation of the gospel that the Church enacts within the world. Again, we begin to see the connections here with an account of mission and evangelism. Yet, Williams presses further, to offer a description that goes beyond the limitations of advocacy and responsibility.

Williams brings these two theologians together in order to demonstrate the similarity of their understandings of “advocacy” and “responsibility” as forms of engagement between Church and world and, more particularly, as theological grounding for an understanding of the *laos* and their mission, an understanding that Williams finally seeks to capture in a descriptive suggestion. As he writes, “it seems that the calling of the laity is above all to *intercede*.”<sup>71</sup> He goes on,

To be an advocate *within* the world for the powerless and victims is inseparable from the task of representing the powerless before God. Where I stand, day by day in the world, will determine what I can and must do in the liturgy where the connections of the world and the Kingdom are woven afresh. There will be no truthful liturgy without the conscious bringing into the sphere of God’s action in Christ as presented in the liturgy the knowledge that arises from where the baptised person actually stands.<sup>72</sup>

Such a vision of intercession undermines an overstated differentiation of Church and world, as Williams argues that the People of God are called to “represent” and to “give voice” to all human persons, “to proclaim and honour the connection which God has already made between the world and the divine life, in creation and in redemption.”<sup>73</sup>

Thus, while baptism constitutes the citizenship of the Christian ‘nation,’ the particularity

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 17.



of the Peoplehood that is the Church, this nation, this People, is created explicitly for priestly presence within the world, as advocate and intercessor, “naming” God’s work in the world and “bearing” it to God in work and prayer.<sup>74</sup>

As I have hinted along the way, despite the fact that the word “evangelism” does not appear within these descriptions, we can discern an account of evangelistic mission taking form here. In *Evangelism After Christendom*, Bryan Stone rightly argues that “the most evangelistic thing the Church can do today is to be the Church.”<sup>75</sup> With that statement in mind, I suggest that it may be helpful to think of the Church’s evangelistic mission as the constant stance of living between God and the world, and constantly “leaning both ways at once,” bearing one to the other, articulating the work of God in the world as well as the need of the world to God. In other words, this evangelistic mission is not just to *offer* prayer, but rather, to *be* prayer, to participate in God’s ongoing creation and redemption of the world through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Even more specifically, we might say that this evangelistic mission is *to intercede*. Evangelism in intercessory terms communicates the agency of the Church in, but not of, the world.

On the one hand, evangelism as intercession avoids problems related to the understatement of the Church-world difference, inasmuch as it insists on an account of formation. Williams argues that the capacity to discern God at work in the world is not imputed to the Church, but is rather a matter of formation, and more particularly, is the expression of a sacramental life lived inside and outside the Church. Because the Eucharist is the prayer that “immerses itself in God’s action of self-identification with the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>75</sup> Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 15.

powerless,” it is both the formation for and description of a way of life for the People of God that troubles any tendency to read the relationship of Church and world in tribal or sectarian terms.<sup>76</sup> As Williams writes, because “the sacramental transformation is, crucially, the work of the *laos*, in its entirety, beginning in the involvement and advocacy of daily experience, the opening of situations to the articulating of God’s victory,” then “it is impossible to see the daily work and ‘secular’ identity of the baptised as matters of theological indifference: the whole must be seen as a matter of Eucharistic intercession, the making of connections.”<sup>77</sup> The sacramental community is always leaning into God and into the world when gathered at the table for Eucharist or for a meal at the homeless shelter.

For United Methodists following Wesley, this formation in scripture, prayer, service, and sacrament is a leaning into God that we call the “means of grace.” Thus, when Christians practice intercessory evangelism, they do so as a community leaning into

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<sup>76</sup> Williams., 17.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. This sounds quite similar to the description Randi Rashkover offers in her introduction to the volume, *Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption*. She writes, “I have, according to Barth, an obligation to the neighbor rooted in the possibility that while he may be a sign of Christ’s humanity, he himself may not be privy to the Word of God. I must, therefore, say something to him about the other side of human need—namely, God. I must, in other words, say something to him about the possibility of announcing his need to God in prayer. Of course, my telling the neighbor about the God to whom we may pray is nothing more than my act of taking up his need in the content of my prayer. My testimony to God before him is occasioned by and directly related to the particularities of his need. Through my encounter with the neighbor, the Word of God has descended into the particularities of his encounter with the world. The Word of God has been invited into the outer sanctuary and herein the order of redemption partakes in the reality of the current situation, all the while the current situation is transformed into the Word of God. Of course, Barth says, I must translate and manifest my prayer for the next one in and through concrete actions. My effort to lend her assistance takes on the form of actions in the world whether these actions be political, economic, medical, legal, or moral. The Word of God extends into and changes the shape of these concrete worldly behaviors. The believer both builds the order of praise and redeems the world through the very activities that constitute its reality. Rooted in praise for God and extended into the prayer for the neighbor, these concrete forms of assurance are liturgical, through and through.” See Randi Rashkover, “Introduction: The Future of the Word and the Liturgical Turn,” in *Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption* eds. Randi Rashkover and C.C. Pecknold (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 19. From an explicitly Christian perspective, Williams clarifies these thoughts on prayer, identifying such prayer as both *intercessory* and *Eucharistic*.

the traditions and practices that shape a people into a “People,” and for United Methodists, that leaning takes the form of practicing the means of grace. In other words, while Christians are always called to participate in the evangelistic task, that task always has an ecclesial shape, as the people of God are always leaning both ways, into the tradition and practices that make the Church the Church, and into the particular challenges, opportunities, joys, and pains of the particular slice of the world where it happens to be, embodying and articulating God’s presence to the world, and the world’s deepest need to God. Witness to the peace and praise that God intends for all creation is the work of an intercessory evangelism, but such an intercessory stance always moves Methodist Christians into the world.<sup>78</sup>

This vision already gestures to the ways in which this account of evangelism as intercession also counters the potential error of overstating the difference of Church and world. While the Church must always be engaged in the work of formation, Williams clarifies that it is a mistake to think about liturgy or catechesis solely as a “training to do things,” with evangelism simply becoming the work of “defending or communicating the Gospel.”<sup>79</sup> If the People of God are called to participate in the ongoing divine action, which is to say, if they are called not only to be with Jesus, but to do what Jesus does, then they are called to an ongoing openness, an “abiding” with God and the world that cannot be differentiated from their time at the Table in the Church or from their advocacy, responsibility, and intercession at home, at work, and in the streets of the

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<sup>78</sup> This paragraph is drawn from Jeffrey Conklin-Miller, “Leaning Both Ways At Once: Evangelism and the Intercessory Church.” In *Generation Rising: A Future with Hope for the United Methodist Church*, edited by Andrew C. Thompson. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 47-48.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, “Being a People,” 19.

world. What defines their existence is exactly that “givenness” and “attentiveness” to God that allows them to name the presence of God not only in the Church but also in the world. This means that evangelism cannot only be the Church’s verbal and visual witness to the watching world. This is the case because there is no account of Church separable from the appearance of this People formed at the intersection of Christians and the “other half of the reconciling event.” In short, the Church must be the Church, but it can only be the Church engaged in the world. As Williams puts it, “If the calling is in fact advocacy and intercession, carrying the world Godwards, [the *laos*] need formation in prayer, in the ‘skill’ of abiding in that movement Godwards that is the movement of Christ to the Father...”<sup>80</sup> There is no doubt, however, that such intercession can only take place *in the world*.

It is significant for an account of evangelism that this skill of “abiding” has a practical, and we might say, a *linguistic* edge, described by Williams in different parts of this article as “the opening of situations to the articulating of God’s victory,”<sup>81</sup> and “the naming of the world in and through God.”<sup>82</sup> This characterization suggests an ongoing work of the Church in the world that may help to define its evangelistic task in ways that will not be limited to the overstated “aesthetic display” of the Church’s “priestly” life, nor to the understated practice of unfettered apologetics, translation, and contextualization. Whereas these latter formulations suffer from their tendency not only to describe the Church’s leaning over into the world, but also the Church’s “falling in,” Williams’s vision stands as an account of an engagement of Church and world embodied

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 15.

in Stringfellow's "advocacy" and Staniloae's "responsibility," and thus, not separated from a Christological account of God's redeeming work in Church and amidst the principalities and powers of the world. In this vision, the work of the *laos* is to give voice to this unfolding redemption, so that

the speech of the believer becomes the attempt to allow God's word to be heard, the word that is at the ground of the sufferer's being, and, by letting it be heard, to begin to weave it closer into the broad pattern of a reconciled world, where the words of created diversity are brought back into harmony with the true and single Word of God which is eternal.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, it is a step forward from contextualization, apologetics, and translation, as well as from "advocacy" and "responsibility" (terms also subject to non-theological interpretation) to begin with Williams' recommendation of *intercession*, the Church simultaneously bearing God to the world and the world to God. Instead of seeking to adapt the message of the Gospel for the sake of contemporary relevance, and rather than shaping the life of the Church so as to maximize its intelligibility among those trained to see by the market-state, the *laos* that move within the world as intercessors will take their lead from their discernment of the signs of God's presence in and among, above and below, the particular powers at work within the particular slice of world they inhabit. Rather than convincingly arguing, coercively demanding, verbally proclaiming, or aesthetically displaying the truth of the Gospel message, the Church practicing evangelism will dwell with the suffering, give voice to the victim, shape faithful institutions, and name the world in a way that articulates to the world the shape of God's victory over death.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. Perhaps we see such an effort embodied in the essays that constitute Williams' book, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 2000).

In one sense, to take this stance is to agree with several voices who call for a renewed emphasis on the Church as a “missional” body, sent to the world to participate in God’s redemptive mission, already in progress. However, it differs from some of these voices, in that it suggests that what Christians do when they intercede is not solely about translating the gospel or contextualizing the Church in search of cultural relevance.<sup>84</sup> Nor is it only concerned with the work of advocacy understood in atheological terms. Instead, the calling to intercede is the calling to pay attention. Leaning both ways at once thus means that Christians pay attention to God and to the world where they live, listening deeply, discerning carefully, and often, waiting patiently.<sup>85</sup>

In fact, these suggestions may lead us to consider the connection between Williams’s offer of “intercession” and what we have called Yoder’s “linguistic crafting”<sup>86</sup> as a kind of “redescription” of the world as key elements of the Church’s

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<sup>84</sup> The distinction between “attractional” and “missional” or “incarnational” descriptions of the Church-world relationship can be found in Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003), 41ff. While a full engagement with their work cannot be pursued here, I am in significant agreement with Frost and Hirsch regarding their critique of the attractional focus, but find that their understanding of the missional-incarnational model, in my terms, leans too far into the world and cannot keep a balance that leans both ways at once. Frost and Hirsch’s placement of ecclesiology as a focus of reflection after Christology and Missiology leads to an overly instrumental understanding of Church. This understanding underwrites a distinction between the “core” identity of the Church and its “expression” which is subject to change, depending on context: “Hold fast to the core but experiment like wild with the expression. The missional-incarnational Church is entirely open to innovation, experimentation, and creativity.” (80) While a missional-ecclesial community will take shape while deeply engaged within the world where it is located, it will also lean into the tradition and practices of the ecclesia in order to navigate that engagement. In order to lean both ways at once, the missional Church must always live at the intersections of apostolicity and catholicity, fidelity to tradition and innovation within context.

<sup>85</sup> This paragraph and note 84 above are drawn from Jeffrey Conklin-Miller, “Leaning Both Ways At Once: Evangelism and the Intercessory Church.” In *Generation Rising: A Future with Hope for the United Methodist Church*, edited by Andrew C. Thompson. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 48, n. 12.

<sup>86</sup> I detail this understanding of “linguistic crafting” in Chapter 3. In his essay, “Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture,” Yoder writes, “If the good is new, it will have to be said in new contexts, where there is no adequate language for it, until that language is crafted.” And “We are not concerned with creation ex nihilo; language is not created that way. A craft works out of living familiarity with the material it transforms.” John Howard Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the

evangelistic task.<sup>87</sup> In this way, we can say that evangelism has a proclamatory character, but not one that can be limited only to the verbal sharing of the gospel or to the need to translate the message in search of cultural relevance. Rather, evangelism in these terms describes a theological task that, as we remember in Williams's work, only occurs "in the middle of things," in "critical, communicative, and celebratory" modes, which, we might say, are always leaning both ways at once. Intercession describes the stance of the *laos* whether gathered or dispersed. Thus, while not erasing the differentiation of Church and world, such a designation emphasizes the way in which the Church is always *in* the world and *for* the world, at once priestly and prophetic, spiritually and socially responsible, missional and attractional, bridging tradition and innovation—always leaning both ways at once.

## 5.6 Implications for a Methodist Ecclesiology and Evangelistic Mission

It may help to recount the journey up to this point of the argument. While holding to a vision of the Church as a People called Methodist, I have sought to complicate that sense of Peoplehood in search of an account of ecclesiology that can truly lean both ways at once—into the traditions and practices of the Church, but no less located in, engaged with, and indeed, determined by a relationship with the "uncommitted environment" of the world. In pursuit of this account, I have led us to the work of Rowan Williams, a

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Transformer of Culture," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 373.

<sup>87</sup> While this concept is drawn from Frei, Will Willimon utilizes it to describe a quality of the practice of preaching, which seeks "to put the hearer in the contexts that make it possible for scripture to narrate our lives. [We do] that through engaging in quite sophisticated forms of redescription... [understanding] that the gospel does not provide a better explanation about human existence, but rather a different description which we are invited to learn." See William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Preaching to Strangers: Evangelism in Today's World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 11.

theologian within an established Church, committed to formation in the theology and practices of the Christian tradition, yet no less committed to the Church's evangelistic mission of reconciliation with the world. We have relied on his vision of the Church taking shape or appearing as an ongoing expression of the Triune life of "unrestricted communion" in the world in order to suggest a less territorial, more fluid sense of the Peoplehood of the Church in the world. This vision led me to argue that evangelistic mission that leans both ways can only be the constant movement of the Church from the memory of its past to the interrogation of its present, and from repentance of its sin to the world of "division and competition" within which the offer of the unrestricted communion of the Trinitarian life, reflected and enacted first in Jesus and now in his body, can be discovered as *good news*. Subsequently, this assertion influences the way in which I have argued we must articulate the evangelistic mission of the Church. Thus, in the last section, I argued (borrowing again from Rowan Williams) that the Church's ongoing evangelistic engagement with the world can be described as "intercession."

In this final section, we turn to consider how this understanding of the Church as a People taking shape via an intercessory leaning in both ways has an impact on our developing Methodist ecclesiology. In the prior chapter, I drew attention to the ecclesiological significance of the *General Rules* in forming a visible, practicing, and witnessing Methodist People. Supporting this emphasis, we dwelt most specifically with Wesley's writing and with the practices of the disciplined communities of his early Methodist movement.



Yet, Methodism's development throughout the remainder of Wesley's life, and particularly in the centuries after his death, in both Britain and America, produces a problem for an account of Methodist ecclesiology that depends solely on the *General Rules*. This problem arises due to the changing shape over time of the Methodist movement, wherein Methodism moved from a collection of disciplined communities to the inclusion of various institutions such as schools, dispensaries of medical care, and eventually, the structures of a modern denominational Church. This acknowledgment leads us to widen the aperture of our study, to see beyond the small group, the class meeting, or the modern congregation or local Church, in order to include these larger instantiations of Church in an expression of a Methodist evangelistic ecclesiology. At the same time, these expressions of Church must be called to embrace the ways in which they live within the differentiation of Church and world, always leaning both ways at once.

Instead of believing (as individual congregations may be wont to do) that they are the primary expression of the Church in the world, attaching an inappropriate solidity to their structure and mistakenly believing that they alone bear the responsibility to bear the gospel to the world, these expressions of Church must be subjected to the vision of Church as a People leaning both ways, formed as a sacramental community and, at the same time, discovering identity at the point of its intersection with the world. As Russell Richey has argued, "Methodism was bigger and littler than parish."<sup>88</sup> We seek an expression of Methodist ecclesiology that not only leans both ways between tradition and mission, or Church and world, but also between congregation and connection, seeing evangelism as a central practice for both.

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<sup>88</sup> Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism*, 239.

Thus, in what follows, I want to take up a key Methodist marker for ecclesiological identity: the calling to be a “connectional” Church. First, I will reflect on some of the ways in which connectionalism has been interpreted as key to Methodist ecclesiology. Second, I will consider some critique of that interpretation while moving along to make a constructive suggestion. This proposal will come, third, in an argument about the need for connectional identity as a Methodist expression of a Church in the world, an expression that embodies an intercessory stance, fulfilling evangelistic mission by leaning both ways between God and the world, always at once.

### **5.7 Connectionalism and Ecclesiology**

Considered a feature (present, if not named as such) of the early Methodist movement, connectionalism (or as rendered in the British Methodist context, “connexionalism”) referred to a basic set of practices and structures that sought to ensure the presence of unity, primarily among the preachers, but eventually extending as well to the general members of the Methodist societies in England. Retaining such connection was not a primary concern in the earliest days of the movement, as the visible and practical source of unity for all of Methodism lay in the one person of John Wesley; he was the one point with which all others in Methodism remained “in connection.” However, as Richard Heitzenrater points out, “connexionalism” began with the preachers in the movement: “Wesley came to realize that this sense of connectedness of the preachers to him should also be strengthened by an explicit expression of covenantal relationship among themselves... Therefore a covenant was drawn up in 1752 in which

the preachers declared that they would speak and act in union with each other.”<sup>89</sup>

Eventually, this sense of unity spread beyond the preachers to include the members of the movement as well; as Wesley wrote to the people of Trowbridge within a year of his own death, “I have only one thing in view—to keep all the Methodists in Great Britain *one connected people*.”<sup>90</sup> Brian Beck leads us to see Wesley’s same commitment to unity focused on the fledgling American Church when he quotes Wesley’s last letter to the Methodists overseas. Here, he “urges them to declare clearly that ‘the Methodists are *one people* in all the world [and] that it is their full determination so to continue.”<sup>91</sup> It is from this desire that structures and practices develop in the Methodist movement to ensure this connectedness and unity: the structure of the Conference and the practices of Holy Conferencing. Of course, as Russell Richey reminds us, the annual conference continues in United Methodist polity as the “basic” or “fundamental” body of the Church, enjoying “that distinction constitutionally, operationally, theologically, and historically.”<sup>92</sup>

Despite these efforts to ensure unity and common identity, as Methodism began to evolve from movement to Church, connectionalism came to describe the institutional bureaucratic structures of the Church rather than the interconnected nature of a

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<sup>89</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Connectionalism and Itinerancy: Wesleyan Principles and Practice,” in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission and Identity, United Methodism and American Culture*, eds. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31, emphasis added.

<sup>91</sup> Brian Beck, “Connexion and Koinonia: Wesley’s Legacy and the Ecumenical Ideal,” in *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy Maddox, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 131, emphasis added.

<sup>92</sup> See *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2008* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), Para. 11, 33. See also Russell Richey, “Organizing for Missions,” in *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2009), 99, n.6.

missionary movement. Indeed, despite efforts to counter this development in more recent years, this situation has remained the same, and the “connection” is still often used in common parlance among United Methodists to refer not to the bonds of unity shared in ministry, but rather, to the structures and institutions that exist at the level of the Conference, Jurisdiction, and General Church. This is, as Richey puts it, a vision of connectionalism as “the church’s officialdom, its apparatus.”<sup>93</sup>

Countering this tendency, attention has been paid more recently in both the British Methodist Church and in the United Methodist Church to the theological commitments inherent in the connectional concept. For some, focus has been placed particularly on the explicit linkage of connectionalism to the growing awareness of the relationship of koinonia and ecclesiology developed in ecumenical theological conversation.<sup>94</sup> These moves were generated primarily from work at the World Council of Churches (WCC) meeting at Canberra in 1991, and particularly from the Faith and Order gathering in Santiago de Compostela in 1993, where the unity of the Church was grounded in the concept of koinonia:

Koinonia is above all, a gracious fellowship in Christ expressing the richness of the gift received by creation and humankind from God. It is a

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<sup>93</sup> Russell Richey, *Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice, Vol. 5 in the United Methodism and American Culture Series* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 17.

<sup>94</sup> A significant contribution made in this conversation can be found in the work of Brian Beck; see Brian Beck, “Connexion and Koinonia: Wesley’s Legacy and the Ecumenical Ideal,” in *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 129-141. See also David Carter, *Love Bade Me Welcome: A British Methodist Perspective on the Church* (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2002). As Carter notes, the connection between koinonia and connexionalism played a significant role in the development of the ecclesiological study in the British Methodist Church, “Called to Love and Praise: A Methodist Conference Statement on the Church” (Peterborough, UK: Methodist Publishing House, 1999). Interestingly, this study is not mentioned at all in a piece from Bruce Robbins written at roughly the same time in the United Methodist context; see Bruce W. Robbins, “Connection and Koinonia: Wesleyan and Ecumenical Perspectives on the Church,” in *Doctrines and Discipline, United Methodism and American Culture, Volume 3*, eds. Dennis M. Campbell, William B. Lawrence, and Russell E. Richey (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 199-212.

many dimensional dynamic in the faith, life, and witness of those who worship the Triune God, confess the apostolic faith, share in the Gospel and sacramental living, and seek to be faithful to God in Church and world...<sup>95</sup>

However, to go further, the report makes clear that this koinonia is not just a horizontal description of the unity shared among the visible Church in the world across space, but is also descriptive of a vertical relationship; koinonia is grounded in the very nature of God as Trinity. Again, quoting from the Santiago Report:

The interdependence of unity and diversity which is the essence of the Church's koinonia is rooted in the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the perfect expression of unity and diversity and the ultimate reality of relational life.<sup>96</sup>

Consequently, the connection is made between the common life of members in mission and ministry within the Methodist movement and the unity displayed in the koinonia of the early Church, and both are reflective of the perichoretic inter-relations of the Godhead. To participate in the unity of the Church is to participate in the unity of God's inner life, and in this way, the "connexion" cannot be limited to a descriptive term for the structures of ecclesial organization; instead, connectionalism is given theological freight: it is the means by which Methodists are a "People" in the world, connected deeply to one another and to the Triune God who calls us together in worship and sends us out in mission.

While this move seeks to offer a theological reading of connectionalism, there has been some resistance to such an effort. In his article "Koinonia, Connexion, and Episcopate: Methodist Ecclesiology in the Twentieth Century," David Chapman argues that the linking of connexion and koinonia is misguided, just to the extent that these terms

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<sup>95</sup> Quote from the Santiago report, in Beck, "Connexion and Koinonia," 137.

<sup>96</sup> Santiago Report, quoted in Beck, "Connexion and Koinonia," 137.

are presented as in some sense interchangeable.<sup>97</sup> While he believes that there is something to be gained by a deeper connection between the concept of connexionalism and koinonia, Chapman does not believe that connexionalism as structural unity can be equated to the deeper and more significant unity represented by Baptism into the Body of Christ and sustained by participation in the Eucharist. “Thus is it koinonia rather than connexionalism which gets to the heart of the inward spiritual reality of Christian unity.”<sup>98</sup> So, “whereas connexionalism expresses the structural implications of koinonia, koinonia is the invisible reality to which connexionalism bears witness. They are the visible and invisible bonds of Christian unity.”<sup>99</sup> With this differentiation in mind, Chapman warns against privileging connexion over koinonia, suggesting that to do this is to undervalue the greater importance of the sacramental unity that is constitutive of koinonia. He asks, “To what extent are we justified in continuing to attach greater ecclesiological significance to Wesley’s network of societies than to his sacramental theology and practice?”<sup>100</sup> While Chapman’s question does not necessarily foreclose on the possibility that such reclamation of connexionalism might be a helpful marker of Methodist ecclesiological identity, it does remind us that we must continually attend to the ways in which Methodist identity as a “holy people” in the world is nurtured not only in our own tradition, but in the tradition of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

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<sup>97</sup> David M. Chapman, “Koinonia, Connexion and Episcopate: Methodist Ecclesiology in the Twentieth Century,” in *Methodism Across the Pond: Perspectives Past and Present on the Church in Britain and America*, ed. Richard Sykes (Oxford, UK: Applied Theology Press, 2005), 4-10.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

At the same time, Chapman's question also falls into the trap we seek to escape in this project, namely, the invitation to "lean only one way." While Chapman seeks to emphasize the primacy of the theological in an evaluation of connectionalism, he does so in a way that requires a problematic separation of the theological from the structural. Chapman is right to the extent that the desire to read connectionalism in theological terms resists the reductionistic reading of connectionalism as solely a description of structure. But even that improved reading is subject to the critique that it may overstate that relationship, rendering it difficult to connect the vision of koinonia to the actual structures and institutions that embody Christian evangelistic mission in the world.

Richey's historical evaluation of American Methodism offers a way to conceive of the Church that leans both ways when he suggests that "Methodism was bigger and littler than parish."<sup>101</sup> On the one hand, this claim makes room for an account of Methodism that emphasizes a visible, practicing, witnessing People called Methodist, nurtured by the General Rules and formed to be the Church, interceding in the world. At the same time, this claim also makes room for an account of Methodism that locates the Church in the People connected in the nexus of relationships, structures, and institutions of connectional Methodism. In this frame, connectional Methodism constitutes a basis of evangelistic engagement with the world that goes beyond verbal proclamation and aesthetic witness. The Church embodies an intercessory presence with "the other half of the reconciling event," seeking the extension of "unrestricted communion," in a Peoplehood that appears in the class meeting and in the General Conference and in bodies and structures, institutions and partnerships that occur everywhere in between.

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<sup>101</sup> Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism*, 239.

This is a claim that requires more attention. How shall we speak of the Church's evangelistic presence among this spectrum of ecclesiological location, from local to regional to global? Here, Richey leads us to consider the particularly Methodist institution of the Conference. In his book, *The Methodist Conference in America, A History*, Richey argues that American Methodists understood their Wesleyan mission, "to reform the Continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these lands," in terms of a calling to seek "Zion," a term that "served to expand rather than limit, to place Methodism central in God's redemptive activities, to claim connection with God's people Israel and the whole of redemptive history..."<sup>102</sup> Glimpses of this "Zion" came to pass when Methodists gathered in Conference, Richey suggests. So much more than an organizational structure or a business meeting, Methodist Conference in Richey's interpretation constituted an alternative space and time, rendering geography and temporality part of the broader eschatological frame seeking Zion. So, when Methodists gathered for Conference, whether at the level of the class, or in the regional quarterly or annual gatherings, their life together and practices with one another constituted something approximating Zion, something that they would eventually come to describe as Church.

However, it is important to note that Conference for American Methodists, particularly quarterly Conference, was not an intra-ecclesial affair. Conference was always a conglomeration of revivalistic practices, and—significantly—created space and time where the People called Methodist dwelled together with the "uncommitted

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<sup>102</sup> Russell Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1996), 34.



environment” of the “other half of the reconciling event.” Richey describes this quality as the Conference’s “gravitational” character. In other words, as Richey describes it, the Conference offered

a variety of services to minister to the needs of people at different stages on the path to salvation. Under these conditions, the organization itself yielded revival—a special gravitational force exercised its pull, drew the faithful closer and dragged in new adherents, some of whom had come quite unprepared for conversion.<sup>103</sup>

The glimpse of Zion that appeared in the particular space, time, and gravity of the Conference, Richey argues, constituted a “new blueprint for ecclesial existence” in America.<sup>104</sup> The People called Methodist, whether embodied in the most local class meeting or, eventually, in the larger networks of connectional relationship, both were “in” Conference, and, we might say, “performed” Conference, and this dual location constituted what it meant to be the Church.

While these reflections on American Methodist ecclesiology are borne out of historical reflection and, for Richey, represent an argument for contemporary Methodist identity and mission, I want to extend these reflections to consider how they influence the account of evangelism taking shape here. Indeed, as Abraham has argued, evangelism is first the work of God through Christ and the Spirit, and thus, it is also the work of Christians who share in this divine *missio*. But significantly, Abraham argues, evangelism is also the work of the Church. The Church is an agent in the evangelistic task. Evangelism in these terms takes on a larger significance. It resists the separation of evangelism from mission (reductively understood), and the problematic under- and

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

overstatement of the Church-world difference; evangelism as intercession is the work of the People of God engaging the world, and even discovering itself in that engagement. Thus, evangelism cannot be work undertaken in order to accommodate the Church to the world, nor can it be the offer only of an attractive alternative to the world.

Given our expansion of Methodist ecclesial identity to include a People in connection and conference, evangelism cannot only be the work of the congregation (or more realistically, a small portion of the congregation). While the local Church may be, as the current Discipline of the United Methodist Church suggests, the “primary” context for the formation of disciples, we make a mistake if we limit evangelism to this context, inasmuch as the local Church does not exhaust what we mean when we speak of the United Methodist Church. Yet, we also make a mistake if we believe that the only other option for evangelistic ministry is to locate it in the so-called para-Church, or in the ministries beyond the local Church we refer to as “extension ministries.”

Now, intercessory evangelism is the work of the Church, which is to say, the intercessory advocacy of the class meeting practicing the General Rules as well as the People called Methodist serving in (for instance) the institutions of hospital, agency, and school. Methodist ecclesial heritage in Class, Conference, and Connection constitutes the environment within which we can narrate a wide variety of ecclesial forms through which the “People called Methodist” can engage the world. In the prior chapter, I pointed to the possibility that a reclamation of the disciplined practices embodied in the *General Rules* could lead (and I believe, in some places, is now leading) to the formation of new ecclesial community beyond the local congregation. House churches and other “fresh

expressions” are taking shape in order to nurture a visible, practicing, and witnessing People called Methodist in the world. Now, given the argument in this chapter, we can also say that a Conferencing and Connectional People called Methodist are also engaging the world, interceding to stand between God and the world, practicing advocacy and responsibility and always engaging with the “other half of the reconciling event.” This development gives us permission to imagine the People called Methodist taking shape through the “tactical alliances” and new partnerships with social entrepreneurs, educators, advocates, and healers, serving together in new initiatives and even institutions that offer a glimpse of the Zion at the center of American Methodist hope. All of this activity participates in the ongoing mission of God, and it can be, and has been described as, the Church’s outreach, or community service, or social ethics. But I argue that beyond these terms, this work of the People called Methodist in the world is most rightly described as *evangelism*—the intercessory stance of the People of God in the world, always leaning between Church and world, between formation and mission, between tradition and innovation, both ways at once.

## CONCLUSION

There is nothing new about the issues addressed in this dissertation. The discernment necessary to determine a faithful path in the midst of the world is a task always present before the Church. As George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder name it, this task constitutes the “present crisis” of North American churches, as opposed to that of reclaiming “lost ground or turf” or holding nostalgically to the belief that “we should again hold the privileged position for America’s moral and spiritual guidance.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, Hunsberger and Van Gelder claim that the Church must “encourage the encounter of the gospel with our culture,” and face the fact that our task now is “learning how to be a church that by its nature lives always *between gospel and culture*...”<sup>2</sup> The questions such a claim raises have guided this study and also point out directions for future work as well.

Whereas Hunsberger and Van Gelder rely on the language of culture to delineate the Church’s task, I make use of the theological distinction of Church and world. Within that differentiation, we have sought to articulate the nature, or more specifically, the identity and the agency, of the Church and the world. And in articulating their relationship, I have argued that maintaining the differentiation of Church and world is a requirement for the possibility of both Christian identity and meaningful evangelistic mission. More specifically, seeking to articulate a distinctively Methodist theology of evangelistic mission, I have argued for the Church as a Peoplehood, a politics constantly in formation, engaging the “other half of the reconciling event” and extending

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<sup>1</sup> George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, “Introduction,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, eds. George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

“unrestricted communion” as it serves an “intercessory” role, standing between God and the world. In short, this is what is meant when we say that a missional evangelism is a calling to “lean both ways at once,” living dialectically at the intersection of Church and world. Put differently, I have argued that the possibility of the Church’s evangelistic mission in the world is contingent on the formation of a holy People called Methodist, but that the formation of such a holy People is itself contingent on the Church’s connection to and engagement with the world. There is no formation without evangelistic mission, and there is no evangelistic mission without formation; Once again, there must be a “leaning both ways at once.”

### **6.1 Leaning Both Ways Inside Methodist Ecclesiology**

However, we must press the image of the leaning both ways to describe not only the stance the Church takes vis-à-vis the world in evangelistic mission, but also the structures that constitute Methodist ecclesiology. This task recalls Russell Richey’s insight that before the development of the “local church,” Methodism was both “smaller than” and “larger than” the local congregation. This is to say that as an ecclesial tradition, Methodism finds its identity and agency for evangelistic mission not only when we reflect on the congregation, but also on the smaller and larger embodiments of Methodist Peoplehood in the world. This focus certainly calls for attention to the Methodist practices of “social grace” embodied in the life of the traditional class meeting, sharing accountability, support, and sacramental life together. At the same time, we have also emphasized the ways in which Methodism embodied mission in Connectional

structures, through the Conference and its “gravitational” relationship to the surrounding world, as well as to the various institutions that mediate Methodist evangelistic mission—in publishing, education, and medical care.

We can go on from here to argue that the possibility of Methodist evangelistic mission, and the renewal of that evangelistic mission, is not best served by drawing attention solely, or even primarily, to its embodiment in the congregation. Instead, I argue that we must articulate Methodist ecclesial identity and agency in a way that will include congregation, but also, the bodies “smaller than” and “larger than” the local Church. This method will inform the development of Methodist evangelistic mission, requiring constant theological reflection in navigating the relationship of the Church and the world. It welcomes the reflection on the local congregation we find in Jones’s and Hunter’s work, but it seeks to balance that reflection with theological concern for the evangelistic mission of the larger Church’s engagement with the principalities and powers of the world—concern of which we find hints in Arias, Abraham, and Pope-Levison. Along with Lacey Warner’s work, my project invites the ecclesially-focused project of Stone to engage more deeply the history and the example of evangelism lived among “saving women” and to locate itself more clearly within the Methodist theological tradition. And along with Yoder and Williams, it envisions a wide array of instantiations of the People called Methodist in the world, leaning both ways between formation and evangelistic mission, between priestly, prophetic, and kingly presence. It embraces the paradox of being, at the same time, a People in the world and a community of unrestricted communion.

## **6.2 Methodist Evangelistic Mission: Smaller Than Congregation**

While we must focus on the ways that evangelistic mission so framed is the pursuit of the local Church, it is perhaps less clear among those who write in evangelism how this articulation of evangelistic mission is the work of both the small group and the larger institution. Yet, as we move ever further into our own time, when the local congregation struggles to survive, we also enter a time when openness to new forms of ecclesial life appears interesting and inviting. As mentioned in Chapter 4, interest in planting new Churches informed by models of ecclesial community other than the local congregation seems to be rising. Of course, given our engagement with the disobedient agency of the powers in the world, we must be vigilant that such interest not succumb to the temptation to support institutional survival more than evangelistic mission. Still, in an era where house Church networks, new monastic communities, and other “fresh expressions” of Church are appearing with denominational support and approval, the need for deeper theological reflection is clear. In the contextualization of the Church in new communities, we will have to ask about what difference is achieved when we think about these formations not as the work of an “incarnational missional,” but rather, an “intercessory ecclesial” Church. Instead of leaning just one way, forming an instrumental Church in order to meet the needs of relevance within any given context, intercession offers us the ways in which to imagine forms of Methodist life taking shape in the world, a People called Methodist, leaning into their calling to be Church, but always in, drawing from, and connected with the world.

### **6.3 Methodist Evangelistic Mission: Larger Than Congregation**

Yet, if this vision names some of the ways in which we can begin to imagine evangelistic mission taking shape in Church “smaller than” congregation, we must also consider how this vision informs our imagination vis-à-vis the larger, institutional ecclesial structures. As we have already seen, the relationship of Methodism and the building of organization and institution is not a new development in the Wesleyan tradition. Assuming the placement of the ecclesia in the Church of England and the renewal work of the ecclesiola in the Classes and Bands of the United Societies, the Methodist movement was freed to engage in the development of new ventures, partnerships, and entrepreneurial work meant to further its evangelistic mission. Thus, whether considering the extensive publishing of tracts and sermons, the distribution of food and medical care through the New Room in Bristol, or the education and Christian formation of children and youth at the Kingswood School, the connectional structuring of Methodism has always meant to serve the extension of an evangelistic mission.

Acknowledging concerns about bureaucratization often identified with Methodist connectional identity and structure, I want to press for the ways in which a “leaning” in this direction might also lead to new forms of ecclesial life in service to the extension of an evangelistic mission. This is to call neither for the repristination of historical forms of Methodist evangelistic life, nor for the reaffirmation of the theological limitations that have traditionally embodied them. It is, however, to suggest that the spirit of such ventures that took the Church into public space can inform contemporary imagination. This is to ask whether we can imagine the rich partnerships and, as Yoder called them,



“tactical alliances,” that the Church can make with institutions and organizations “in the world,” and yet, orient those alliances toward forms of service and witness that would bear theological description as evangelistic mission. For example, given Wesley’s experience in starting the Kingswood School, and given the contemporary example of American Methodist desire to develop institutions of higher education, what might become of partnership between those concerned for education, youth advocacy, and a Church called to invest in the formation of young people? While a suggestion in this direction would usually be relegated to the departments of the denomination concerned for missions or the relationship of “Church and Society,” my project frames it as a form of evangelistic mission, and more importantly, as the work of the Church, being the Church, firmly located in the world.

#### **6.4 Expanding the Conversation**

While we have focused upon the ways in which this conversation is particularly connected to a need for clarity in ecclesiology and evangelistic mission for Methodists, this discussion can be fruitfully expanded when considering similar themes in other theological projects. This expansion requires a diversity of conversation partners, each reflecting the paradox inherent to an account of the Church theologically differentiated from and yet in evangelistic mission to, in, and with the world. We can find these voices speaking from within different contexts and perspectives.

For example, in her book, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, Serene Jones engages both liberal and communitarian feminist theory in relation to Christian theology

in order to articulate an ecclesiology that “leans both ways at once.” The engagement leads her to a vision of Church as a space of “bounded openness.”<sup>3</sup> So framed, the Church exists as one community at the intersection of two different stories of God’s action. God “creates, forms, envelops, and protects the Church,” establishing the Church as a particular people, a “bounded” community where “the Church knits back together and holds tightly and safely those broken by the fragmenting and dominating powers.”<sup>4</sup> But God also “judges and forgives the Church,” which requires the Church’s “openness” to both the sins of the world which it reflects and to the grace of God which it receives. Thus, at one and the same time, the Church is both a particular people constituted in scripture, sacrament, and prayer to be children of God, *and* also a people radically part of the world, open to the world, reflective of the world, and sent to the world. Here we see the Church-world difference functioning, but in a way that seeks to maintain the paradoxical stance of leaning both ways at once.

Another fruitful conversation seeking to deepen these reflections on the identity and evangelistic mission of the Church’s engagement with the world might be found in the North American Latino theology of Virgilio Elizondo and his arguments for the Church as the new mestizo creation. Elizondo first published these thoughts in his work, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*<sup>5</sup>, but developed them from his doctoral dissertation, which more explicitly considered the issue of evangelization, “Mestizaje: The Dialectic of Cultural Birth and the Gospel. A Study in the Intercultural

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<sup>3</sup> Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 170-1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

Dimension of Evangelization.”<sup>6</sup> In *Galilean Journey*, Elizondo considers the problematic dynamic inherent to the differentiation of Church and world: “By being *in* but not *of* the world the church by its very nature came to be marginated—an in/out group... If the Church separated itself totally from the world or if it totally identified itself with the world, it would not be of true service to humanity.”<sup>7</sup> He goes on:

In speaking about itself, the church uses such terms as *mystery* and *people of God*. It is incarnated in the world, but not swallowed up by it. It expresses itself through the language and symbols of the people, but its message revolutionizes the meaning of both the language and the symbols. The church is the *mestizo par excellence* because it strives to bring about a new synthesis of the earthly and the heavenly (Eph. 1:10). It is the ‘third’ or new people, which assumes the good that was there before and gives it new meaning, direction, and life: faith, hope, and charity.<sup>8</sup>

Already here we can detect several themes that have appeared in our engagements with Yoder and Williams. Elizondo clearly locates the Church in the world, but is careful to do so in a way that insures the Church’s distinct identity. Like Yoder, he also suggests that the Church’s engagement with the world in proclamation resists collapsing the former into the latter. Instead, like the linguistic crafting we discussed in Yoder’s work, Elizondo points to the gospel’s revolutionary reinterpretation of the language and symbols present within the world. Yet the vision of *mestizo* is resistant to the overstatement of Church-world difference, as it points to the formation of a “third people,” crafted in the inevitable mixture of cultures at the intersection of the Church’s missionary engagement with the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *Mestissage, violence culturelle, annonce de l'évangile : la dimension interculturelle de l'évangélisation* (PhD diss., Catholic Institute, Paris, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 106.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

These engagements are necessary in going forward, as the Church continues to live with the historical reality of the connections between evangelistic mission and broader Western colonial expansion, the institution of slavery, and ongoing discriminations based on race, gender, and class. As James Cone made so painfully clear, “If the real Church is the people of God, whose primary task is that of being Christ to the world by proclaiming the message of the gospel (*kerygma*), by rendering services of liberation (*diakonia*) and by being itself a manifestation of the nature of the new society (*koinonia*), then the empirical institutional white church has failed on all accounts.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, whenever speaking of evangelistic mission to the world, the Church must begin with the critical stance of being, as the title of one of Williams’s books says, “open to judgment.”<sup>10</sup> Further engagements along the lines of those offered here by Jones and Elizondo press us in this direction.

In the calling to “lean both ways at once,” into the Church and into the world, into tradition and into mission, I hope that we may see a broader picture of both, that we might find enough imagination and strength to take a step on a new road, where we cannot disentangle our evangelism from our mission, where we are no longer able to leave our tradition behind as we engage in the world, and where we can stand in the place of the intercessor, between God and the “other half of the reconciling event.”

Christians believe that such imagination and strength is a gift of God’s gracious presence that has always sustained the faithful evangelistic mission of the Church in the

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<sup>9</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1969), 71.

<sup>10</sup> This draws on the title of one of Rowan Williams’s books, *Open to Judgment*, published in the United States as *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, UK: Cowley Publications, 1995).

world. And so it is with that hope that I end with the words of Walter Rauschenbusch, another witness in the tradition who sought, however imperfectly, to “lean both ways.”

As a conclusion to this project, I offer his prayer for the Church:

O God of all times and places,  
we pray for your Church,  
which is set today amid the perplexities of a changing order,  
and face to face with new tasks.  
Baptize us afresh in the life-giving spirit of Jesus.  
Bestow upon us a great responsiveness to duty,  
a swifter compassion with suffering,  
and an utter loyalty to your will.  
Help us to proclaim boldly the coming of your kingdom.  
Put upon our lips the ancient gospel of our Lord.  
Fill us with the prophet’s scorn of tyranny,  
and with a Christlike tenderness for the heavyladen and downtrodden.  
Bid us cease from seeking our own life, lest we lose it.  
Make us valiant to give up our life to humanity,  
that, like our crucified Lord,  
we may mount by the path of the cross to a higher glory;  
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, Prayer #504, in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992).

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