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Rankin on Gibson

Wesley and Methodist Studies is a scholarly journal published annually under the auspices of the Manchester Wesley Research Centre. It is produced by Didsbury Press. The journal focuses on the life and work of John and Charles Wesley and Methodism, with particular interest in the context of the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, and extending to both antecedents and successors of this movement. The Wesleys, whose lives spanned most of the eighteenth century, formed and led the movement known as Methodism. The research center supporting this journal has been in existence nearly ten years, having been formed as a result of the consolidation of several archives holding primary Wesleyan sources. This volume (3, 2011) includes three major articles plus a collection of papers delivered at the 2009 American Academy of Religion session on Methodism and the African Diaspora, 1738-1834.

Philip R. Meadows, "Entering the Divine Embrace: Towards an Ancient-Future Wesleyan Theology of Evangelism," begins the volume. Meadows explores representative theologies of evangelism according to the three basic ingredients common to all such theologies: (1) the nature of the evangel, (2) the *telos* that drives each perspective, and (3) the ethos or communal means by which practitioners of each approach their work. As framework for his constructive proposal of a Wesleyan theology of evangelism, Meadows succinctly describes and critiques two well-known paradigms: "inherited-conversionist" and "emerging-missional."

The evangel, according to the inherited-conversionist model, is personal salvation. It is experienced "in a moment in time," in the crisis moment of conversion, prompted mainly by means of proclamation. Though Billy Graham is no longer active, his ministry still stands as the example par excellence for this approach, with many imitators. This first model is the most common.

Meadows criticizes this model by drawing attention to "its captivity to the individualistic bent" and the tendency for distortion "into a form of private spirituality" (p. 5). Furthermore, the conversionist model too easily reduces to emotionalism and anthropocentrism. In short, Wesleyans have become increasingly critical of this model, Meadows argues, because it has become too captive to some of the more troubling aspects of popular culture.

The emerging-missional paradigm, on the other hand, portrays the evangel in terms of the Kingdom of God and emphasizes the ongoing process (journey) of discipleship. In one sense, then, it stands as the polar opposite in goal and ethos to the individual-conversionist model. One may find evangelical conversion in this approach similar to the former, but far less weight is put on that experience.

Meadows' main concern with the emerging-missional paradigm is precisely that the evangelical experience of personal conversion can be lost altogether (p. 7). Receiving the Gospel is inherently a personal experience, which the inherited-conversionist model knows, but which does not necessarily remain in the other approach.

Meadows then turns to his own proposal, making use of Robert Webber's book, *The Divine Embrace* (2006), for the model that Meadows offers. Dovetailing theological statements of John Wesley with the poetry and hymns of Charles Wesley, Meadows develops an ancient-future theology of evangelism firmly rooted in the contributions of the Wesleys.

The major emphases within that theology start with God's all-embracing love (Wesleyans tend to consider God's primary attribute as love, while Calvinists start with God's sovereignty and glory). Meadows notes that Charles Wesley used God's "saving embrace" as a rich

metaphor (pp. 10-11). Sin is construed, then, as the broken embrace, symbolized primarily in terms of relational and personal brokenness (rather than, for example, human rebellion). Justification by grace through faith is termed “a renewing embrace” (p. 14). Finally, in classic Wesleyan vein, God sustains this work of grace until “salvation to the uttermost” (perfection, holiness) has been wrought.

With these theological contours in place, Meadows then puts into play the three ingredients he has analyzed in the other paradigms. The *telos* of this ancient-future paradigm is communion with God, to love God with one’s whole heart (perfectly, as the Wesleys put it). The ancient-future aspect of this approach comes through clearly at this point, with the emphasis on believers’ participation in the divine nature. Such communion with God leads, by God’s grace, toward the practice of evangelism. The ethos of evangelism takes the shape of spiritual direction. The follower of Jesus grows and deepens in love for God and neighbor by means of this practice. Motivated by the experience of divine love, people so transformed become the evangelistic “outreaching hands” (p. 25) of God’s love. The article ends with a helpful and simple table that shows the distinctive emphases of each of the paradigms Meadows has described.

By analyzing the two previous paradigms and offering the ancient-future one, Meadows argues that he is drawing on the former paradigms’ strengths and synthesizing them in the third (p. 27). Furthermore, he argues that, through this ancient-future lens, the Wesleys emerge anew as a rich resource for engaging the work of evangelism.

Meadows is an astute and experienced exegete of the Wesleyan tradition. His ancient-future paradigm makes use of a contemporary and lengthening trend among scholars aware of the limitations of modernist assumptions. From this vantage point, the Wesleys, perhaps surprisingly, come into view with renewed relevance. Persons interested in thinking about the evangelistic task in our day will find much help in Meadows’ thinking.

The main challenge facing this article is one that Meadows names at the beginning. The very terms by which one construes the Gospel, the basic human problem that the Gospel rectifies, and the manner by which God does this work, all tie directly to theological assumptions related to divergent scriptural foundations. Hence, if one believes, for example, that the Bible emphasizes a penal-substitutionary view of the atonement, then the convictions that humans are rebellious sinners (rather than broken and out of relationship) stands forth as the

most apt description. Of course, these constructions are not mutually exclusive, but they do contribute to differing loyalties with regard to which paradigm for evangelism one should choose. For the most fruitful dialogue to take place, then, proponents of these various paradigms will need to engage with one another directly, traversing doctrinal and ecclesial boundaries and the groups formed around them.

It is not fair to compare a journal article to a whole book, but for readers interested in the way others in the same theological tradition as Meadows handles the task of evangelism, they might consider Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (2003). An older book length work by a Methodist theologian, and one addressing some of the same concerns as Meadows, is William J. Abraham’s *The Logic of Evangelism* (1989).

The next article, written by Christopher T. Bounds, is titled “How are People Saved? The Major Views of Salvation with a Focus on Wesleyan Perspectives and their Implications.” The main goal of Bounds’s work is to identify “the many ways the church has articulated the way of salvation” (p. 54) and to demonstrate that churches in the Wesleyan tradition actually orient around two basic and differing models. In this way, he seeks not only to clarify and more precisely locate Wesleyan theologians (including the Wesleys themselves) with regard to soteriology, but also to show why one reading is stronger than the other.

The main question of Bounds’s survey has to do with the interplay between divine and human action, that is, what part of being saved depends on divine action and what part requires human action? He divides the answers into four categories, placing them along a spectrum from the highest degree of human action (“human monergism”) to the highest degree of divine action (“divine monergism”). Here we find well-known representatives: (1) Pelagianism, (2) Semi-Pelagianism, (3) Semi-Augustinianism, and (4) Augustinianism. Pelagianism stands at the “human monergism” end, with Augustinian at the other “divine monergism” end. A chart visualizes this range of positions (p. 35).

Each position has a concept for the basic human problem that salvation addresses. Pelagianism denies original sin outright; therefore salvation comes through human initiative and by following the teachings of Jesus. God’s grace in this view comes through natural features of the created order. Semi-Pelagianism recognizes the need for divine grace, but the initial move to accept this grace can be found within the human person; thus Bounds de-

scribes this position as one of *human-divine* synergism. Semi-Augustinian reverses the order. God takes the initiative but leaves room for human action in response, a *divine-human* synergism. Augustinianism, as noted, represents divine monergism, making makes God's grace irresistible in the manner of salvation.

At this point, Bounds makes the turn to show why he believes none of these four standard descriptions adequately reflects Wesleyan thought. He thus adds three more positions: "Soft Semi-Pelagianism (between "Pelagianism" and "Semi-Pelagianism"), "Soft Semi-Augustinianism" (between "Semi-Pelagianism" and "Semi-Augustinianism") and "Soft Augustinianism" (between "Semi-Augustinianism" and "Augustinianism"). With each addition he provides clarifying descriptions to show how they differ from what is already on the spectrum. If the reader finds it difficult to keep these distinctions clear, figure 2 on page 46 provides assistance.

To give one example to show why Bounds adds the nuances: Soft Semi-Augustinianism as construed by some contemporary Wesleyans "impl[ies] or explicitly teach[es] that prevenient grace given to all enables humanity to move toward God, repent, and exercise faith" (p. 48). Bounds argues that, though this view provides more clarification than the four basic positions with which he began, this more modern view distorts John Wesley's Soft Augustinian perspective.

This distinction comes particularly close to Bounds's concern, since with the added nuances we find where he would like to place Wesleyan theologians. In other words, the standard model does not fit Wesleyan thought very well and often leads to erroneous conclusions about Wesleyan theology by non-Wesleyan theologians. Furthermore, he is also concerned as well about the "slip-page" within the Wesleyan tradition, as illustrated in the previous paragraph.

Bounds laments that the dominant paradigm for contemporary Wesleyans unfortunately has become the human-divine synergism of the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagians varieties. He calls it a "betrayal of Wesleyan Semi-Augustinian theology" (p. 52) and comments on the practical implications with regard to the Christian life in conversion and sanctification. He ends with a description of the Semi-Augustinian view that he believes is closest to authentic Wesleyan theology. In short, no experience of salvation can occur until God moves in one's heart. "When God gives grace to repent, and when God bestows grace to believe, then, and only then, is conversion possible" (p. 53).

The strength of Bounds's argument can also be seen

as its weakness. Those of us in the Wesleyan tradition who feel sufficiently comfortable with the self-description "evangelical," yet who are looked upon with wariness and even suspicion by evangelicals in the Reformed tradition, find reason to applaud the nuance. It moves us more firmly onto the Augustinian side and away from Pelagianism, which has long been the charge laid at Wesleyans' feet by folk in the Reformed tradition. Wesleyans have often said that Reformed thinkers have not understood John Wesley. In this regard I believe Bounds is being true to the best in Wesleyan theology.

At the same time, one could reasonably argue that the nuances are too subtle and might ultimately look like distinctions without real differences. The question (that pinpoints Reformed theologians suspicious of Wesleyans) still comes down to whether *any* human action can occur in the order of salvation with the kind of freedom Wesleyans maintain. This remains the question that Reformed folk will ask of Wesleyans. Bounds's position asserts no human initiative, but maintains a degree of human freedom, established, of course, on the basis of God's prior grace. But then the specter of human initiative begins to creep back into the picture.

Bounds has engaged an important topic, one that speaks directly to internecine struggles within Wesleyan and Methodist circles (especially The United Methodist Church) as well as ecumenical discussions between Wesleyans and Calvinists. This article makes a good start at bringing clarity. I would like to see Bounds address more fully the challenge of maintaining the requisite human action (for Wesleyans) while not succumbing to the taint of some version of Pelagianism. Readers who know the work of Kenneth Collins—for example, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (2007)—as well as Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (1994), will find Bounds's essay illuminative, but probably will hunger for more of how Bounds would stabilize these additional categories that he believes necessary to situate Wesleyan anthropology properly.

The third major article in this volume is a sociological study. In "Secession is an Ugly Thing: The Emergence and Development of Free Methodism in Late Twentieth-Century England," Derek Tidball aims to assess "the extent to which the new [Free Methodist] church was fundamentalist" (p. 56). However, there is sufficient ambivalence in the use of the term "fundamentalist" to make this reviewer wish for a little more conceptual clarity and discipline in the way the article is written. One finds a general definition of "fundamentalis" on page 69, stated as

“an opposition to biblical criticism, a degree of belligerence and militancy, separatism, anti-modernism, hostility to entertainment and, perhaps, a feeling of marginalization.” One can see here the sociological interest.

Yet, as a way of setting apart fundamentalists from evangelicals, Tidball uses a definition of “evangelical” that emphasizes doctrinal and experiential concerns, including “an emphasis on the need for conversion, the necessity of the activity in the Christian life and mission, the authority of the Bible and the centrality of the cross” (p. 69). He has taken this description from David Bebbington’s *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989).

Thus comes my first quibble with the way this article is written. While stating the focus of the paper early, as one would expect, it takes ten pages of narrative before we come to a definition or delineation of the term of interest for Tidball. The intervening narrative is interesting and even helpful, once one has figured out where the author is headed, but it takes a long time to get to the point. In fairness, this article was originally presented as a paper at the Spring Workshop of the Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism in Britain Project. In that context, perhaps, the assumption of a shared definition is understandable and acceptable. Here, in the journal, it would have helped to make the sociological, with the attending definition of the key operative term, more explicit. I shall return to other critique momentarily, but now return to the structure and layout of the argument.

Tidball’s narrative helpfully establishes the context. A group of Methodists, following a number of attempts to resolve differences within the denomination, decided to leave the church and organize themselves as Free Methodists, in communion with the American denomination by that name. The presenting cause for this break stems from prior talks for formal union between the Anglican Church and the Methodist Church (which took place in the late 1960s). Among the four major concerns Tidball lists, the leaders who eventually seceded objected especially to the “commitment to a doctrinal comprehensiveness and relativism, which, they believed, would be a denial of the evangelical heritage of Methodism” (p. 58).

For those ultimately leaving the mother denomination, negotiations of union with the Anglicans was the final straw, following on long intramural struggles both theological and cultural. According to Tidball’s analysis, the fault lines lay between “folk fundamentalism” of especially lay Methodists and the liberalism of many of the clergy, especially with regard to the status of scripture (p. 59). Presumably, then, he wants to discern whether the

clerical leaders who formed the new denomination were pulled completely into the folk fundamentalism of the lay people in their movement, or whether they managed to position themselves another way.

After establishing the context of the aforementioned conflicts, Tidball tells the story of the formation of the Free Methodist Church in Great Britain, with particular focus on the three preachers who led this effort. Then Tidball is ready to come to his main purpose, discerning whether this secession reflects a turn to fundamentalism rather than continuing with what he terms “conservative evangelicalism” (p. 69).

The concerns that this reviewer has with the article are twofold, with one being much more important than the other with respect to the author’s main purpose. The first and more important has to do with ambiguity in the term “fundamentalist.” Whereas ultimately I think the author’s interest is sociological, by virtue of the definition of “fundamentalist” given on page 69, he gives a significant degree of attention to doctrinal and ethical matters. Here I refer to his use of the Free Methodist Church’s *Book of Discipline*. Of particular concern, for example, is how Free Methodists remain faithful to traditional Wesleyan teachings on sanctification (pp. 75-76). A number of such examples could be given from this part of the article, in which Tidball pays attention to how Free Methodists maintain their connection to “standard evangelical beliefs” and to traditional Free Methodist positions on ethical matters like marriage and divorce, Sabbath-keeping, race relations, and pacifism and conscientious objection, to name a few (p. 70).

What remains puzzling and what is not clear to this reviewer has to do with how Tidball draws sociological judgments from the ecclesiological material (for example, the 1995 Free Methodist *Book of Discipline*) he uses as major sources. By looking at specific sections of the *Book of Discipline* and comparing them to earlier sources, he shows how the church’s positions modified. For example, a major doctrine for Free Methodists has to do with sanctification or holiness. Tidball shows how the church’s definition of sanctification remains the same across the decades, but in the 1995 *Book of Discipline*, the church added explanatory material. But how does this part of his exercise connect to his definition of “fundamentalist” given on page 69, which seems what we might label as attitudinal? In other words, how does the change in wording from the *Book of Discipline* speak to attitudes toward modern biblical criticism or hostility to entertainment or a feeling of marginalization, all parts of the definition of-

ferred earlier? For these questions we find no answers.

Thus, although Tidball concludes that Free Methodists remain “conservative evangelical” rather than “fundamentalist” (p. 78), and he draws this conclusion from the aforementioned ecclesial resources, he does not show readers how he can tell that the modifications made in official church statements render this conclusion. In the end, one has the sense of jumping from one academic discipline to another without a clear transition and explanation for the move.

The other, lesser criticism I would make of this article is that there is too much narrative that seems not to be particularly relevant to the main research question. For example, the section “Other Methodist Evangelical Responses,” while interesting to read, seems not to do much work in the argument. One could certainly see how comparing the new Free Methodists to other evangelical Methodists who decided to stay in the mother denomination would help the author draw the conclusion that the Free Methodists were conservative evangelical rather than fundamentalist, but, once this part of the story is told, the author moves to another topic and finally to his conclusion, without making any statement as to how it helps the article progress toward his goal. Again, the reader can do the work of making this link and maybe speculating as to how “Other Methodist Evangelical Responses” helps toward the conclusion, but since the author does not do so, one hesitates to engage in too much mind-reading.

The final section of this volume comprises a collection of papers read at the 2009 American Academy of Religion session on Methodism and the African Diaspora, 1738-1834. Each paper therefore covers an untold or undertold narrative in Methodist history.

Douglas Powe’s introductory essay orients the reader toward the other papers, indicating three main concerns: (1) the impact of Thomas Coke,[1] (2) Anglo paternalism, and (3) questions of *imago dei*. Gareth Lloyd introduces the reader to Scipio Africanus, the first black Methodist among British evangelicals. John Lenton’s paper discusses the attitudes of Methodist preachers toward slavery in America and toward slaves in the West In-

dies. Dennis Dickerson’s paper, “Liberation, Wesleyan Theology and Early African Methodism, 1766-1840,” is an updated version of an article appearing in the *A.M.E. Church Review* CXXIV (2009). It covers the egalitarian themes in Methodist preaching that drew African Americans to Methodism and the struggle for freedom. Suzanne Schwarz’s contribution touches on the work of Methodists, including those of African descent, in the mission to Sierra Leone. This section concludes with a paper on Methodists’ educational initiatives in the Caribbean, by Robert Glen.

These papers venture into deeply important and still underrepresented areas of research. The efforts to bring their subjects to light contribute to the larger program of elucidating the reach of the Wesley brothers and their spiritual and theological descendants. Nathan Hatch pointed out a generation ago in his seminal article, “The Puzzle of American Methodism,” that one of the mysteries of modern American religious history is the lack of sufficient attention to Methodism.[2] The Reformed paradigm—from the Puritans forward to the Neo-evangelicals—continues to dominate. These papers represent a salutary trend within the Wesleyan scholarship that shows the involvement of and contributions by heretofore mostly unknown leaders from among marginalized peoples.

Wesley and Methodist Studies is a major source for people interested in the Wesleyan tradition. As a British publication, it understandably leans heavily on topics of concern for the eastern side of the Atlantic, but authorship is not limited only to British scholars. In this volume, for example, Christopher Bounds is an American theologian while the other two are British theologians.

Notes

[1]. Thomas Coke (1747-1814) was a British Methodist preacher sent by John Wesley to America, becoming, along with Francis Asbury, one of American Methodism’s first two bishops. He took a major leadership role in foreign missions.

[2]. *Church History* 63, no. 2 (June 1994); reprinted in Nathan Hatch and John Wigger, eds., *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001).

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