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John Wesley in Conversation with the Emerging Church

Abstract

As the Emerging Church is one of the most significant developments in current popular Western ecclesiology, it is important that it be engaged theologically. As part of this engagement, this paper brings the Emerging Church into a constructive dialogue with John Wesley, a theologian who shared similar passions and faced comparable challenges. It maintains that Wesley would applaud the spirit and creativity of the Emerging Church, especially its mission to reach contemporary seekers and its desire to recapture an ancient-future faith. However, he would also challenge some potentially harmful tendencies and exhort the Emerging Church toward maturity in these areas. The paper begins by exploring several commonalities between Wesley and the Emerging Church, including: (i) resistance to Enlightenment rationalism and an embrace of religious experience, (ii) a passion for evangelism, (iii) a commitment to a kingdom worldview and values, and (iv) a spirit of ecumenism. Subsequently, the paper offers a critique of certain aspects of the Emerging Church in light of Wesley's theology and ministry and then concludes by proposing a way forward on the basis of insights gained from Wesley.

KEYWORDS: Emerging, Emergent, Church, Wesley, McLaren, postmodern, post-Christendom

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I. Introduction

A growing number of Christians in the Western world are seeking non-traditional expressions of church.¹ One of the most significant examples of this is the Emerging Church, which is the primary focus of this article. This article is also concerned with John Wesley, who may be regarded as something of a kindred spirit to the Emerging Church, since he shared similar passions and faced comparable challenges. In the following sections, I will endeavour to bring Wesley into conversation with the Emerging Church, first, by discussing some of the commonalities between the two; subsequently, by offering a critique of the Emerging Church through the lens of Wesley's theology and ministry; and finally, by suggesting a way forward in light of Wesley's contribution to the conversation.

Some preliminary comments about the Emerging Church are pertinent. First, the Emerging Church is difficult to define, as it is comprised of a diverse network of individuals, churches, theologians, pastors, and others.² It is also geographically dispersed, appearing in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia.³ While some generalizations about the entire phenomenon could be drawn, I have chosen to limit the scope of this article to its North American manifestations. Second, adherents of the Emerging Church prefer to portray it as a 'conversation', rather than a movement or ideology. Dan Kimball, a leading voice in the conversation, cautions that there is no single structure or blueprint for the Emerging Church; it is more of a mindset than a model.⁴ Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some of the dominant values and practices common to its proponents. The Emergent Village website lists the following core values: commitment to God in the way of Jesus, commitment to the Church in all its forms, commitment to God's world, and commitment to one another.⁵ One might also add, based on Emerging Church writings, a commitment to a postmodern critique of modernity. These five values are reflected in the following analysis.

II. Commonalities

One commonality between Wesley and the Emerging Church is their resistance to Enlightenment rationalism and, correspondingly, their promotion of religious experience as necessary for knowledge of God.⁶ In particular, Wesley challenged the deistic natural reductionism of his day and proclaimed a personal God who transforms hearts and lives.⁷ Particularly

disturbing for Wesley was the moral impotency of eighteenth century English Deism to affect social change in a culture which desperately needed it.⁸ Amidst such religious indifference and apathy, he preached a “religion of the heart” characterized by fervent love for God and neighbour demonstrated in concrete acts of service. For Wesley, true religion involves much more than rational thought and assent to formal doctrines. It also ‘enlightens’ heart and hands, affections and behaviour. He wanted to cultivate not only Christian thinking but Christian life in its wholeness. Wesley believed that Christianity is, at its essence, a social religion of love. It is the nature of the Church to infuse the world with love and holiness, just as it is the nature of salt to season whatever it touches.⁹ Thus, he “engaged in serious experiments in catechesis and group spiritual direction that would be effective in making robust disciples of Jesus Christ. . .”¹⁰

The Emerging Church also resists Enlightenment rationalism, espousing instead an experiential approach to faith and knowledge. However, unlike Wesley, who challenged the dominant faith-epistemology of his day, the Emerging Church attacks rationalism *by means of* a contemporary epistemology, namely postmodernism. It contends that modern Evangelicalism is in need of reform, having capitulated unwittingly to the assumptions and methods of modernity, which are obsolete in the postmodern era.¹¹ While much could be said about a postmodern critique of modernity, I propose that the Emerging Church embraces the following components.¹² (1) Postmodernism denies absolute truth (or at least our access to it) and the objectivity of knowledge, especially the concept of the dispassionate observer. (2) Instead of modernity’s optimism about truth (its inherent goodness, its tendency toward system and clarity), postmodernism is sceptical about metanarratives, or ‘totalizing’ claims, and prefers paradox and difference.¹³ Metaphors are preferred over propositions and narratives over systems. (3) In modernity, truth is accessible to the individual through rational methods as opposed to tradition or revelation, while in postmodernism ‘truth’ is discerned through shared experiences of humanity. It is relational, culturally tolerant, and non-hierarchical. (4) While modernity is sceptical about the supernatural (i.e., does God exist?), postmodernism is open to spirituality, ritual, and mysticism (i.e., which god(dess)?). In modernity, mystery should be resolved, but in postmodernism, mystery is welcomed and celebrated. (5) Modern methodology stresses compartmentalization and specialization, whereas postmodernism emphasizes integration, inter-disciplinary inquiry, and the interconnectivity of life. Modernity tends toward dualism (private/public, spirit/body, etc.), while postmodernism embraces tension (not *either/or* but *both/and*).¹⁴

A second commonality shared by Wesley and the Emerging Church is a passion for evangelism. Both endeavour to proclaim the gospel in a manner

relevant to their contemporary contexts, particularly to people who are ostracised from the organized religious establishment. In 1738, at a meeting in Aldersgate, Wesley experienced a deep, personal encounter with God and suddenly understood the significance of the doctrine of justification by faith for his own life. In his words, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that had had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”¹⁵ Wesley’s warmed heart made him an evangelist and fuelled within him a sense of mission which became the core element of Methodism or, as one writer puts it, “Methodism’s true distinction.”¹⁶ However, Wesley soon discovered that most people in the Church of England did not appreciate his newly-awakened passion for personal faith in Christ. Indeed, he was shunned for espousing a ‘new doctrine’ and was prohibited from preaching in many places. So at the invitation of George Whitefield, he began to preach outdoors to large numbers of common people (whom the Church largely ignored), who were desperate to hear his message of grace and hope. Wesley especially loved and had compassion for the poor, regarding them as sheep without a shepherd. He became a mass-evangelist with a gruelling mission, travelling nearly a quarter of a million miles on horseback, delivering some 40,000 sermons, and suffering persecution in many forms, including ridicule, slander, threats from riotous mobs, even violent assaults. In the midst of this, he wrote over two hundred books on a wide variety of subjects.¹⁷

The Emerging Church also possesses evangelistic fervour. Its mission is to reach a world that has become disenchanted with modern Christianity, and especially the Church. Kimball observes, “what was once a Christian nation with a Judeo-Christian worldview is quickly becoming a post-Christian, unchurched, unreached nation.”¹⁸ One of the reasons for this, according to Emerging Church thinkers, is that the Church is still trying to preach a ‘modern gospel’—one that is loaded with modern assumptions and packaged and promoted through modern methods—to a postmodern world. For example, Emerging Church writers are critical of the Seeker Sensitive Movement for capitulating to a consumerist mindset in its evangelism strategies.¹⁹ By adopting modern values of success, excellence, growth, and efficiency, it has become a “vendor of religious goods and services.”²⁰ This is problematic because over the last century, peoples’ basic assumptions, commitments, and values have shifted dramatically.²¹ As Brian McLaren writes, “*Postmodern people don’t want a God shrunken to fit modern tastes.*”²² They are disappointed when they come to church seeking authenticity and mystery, only to find a neat, professionally pre-packaged service. They feel patronized when they come seeking spiritual depth, only to be offered the cliché-ridden and self-help tactics of modern ‘relevant’ sermons. They are dismayed when they sense a call to make a difference in the world for peace and social justice but instead encounter self-serving

organizations interested mostly in conversion and numerical growth. Consequently, Emerging Church leaders envision a different kind of Church, one that is ‘relevant’ precisely because it is authentic, one that is evangelistic precisely because it is distinctively and unapologetically Christian. This Church’s witness flows out of the reality of God’s presence in its midst: “Vintage worship gatherings are for believers to fully worship God and be instructed, equipped, and encouraged, even to a deeper level than ever before. This same very spiritual, experiential worship gathering can be a place where nonbelievers can come and experience God and learn about the practises and beliefs of Christians firsthand.”²³

Third, both Wesley and the Emerging Church exhort Christians to reclaim a kingdom worldview and commit to kingdom values. A kingdom approach is compromised whenever salvation is conceived statically as a one-time spiritual transaction between God and the sinner (i.e., justification is over-emphasized and sanctification under-emphasized). To overcome this error, Wesley tirelessly proclaimed the doctrine of Christian Perfection, stressing that the gospel promises not just forgiveness of sins but also *cleansing* of all unrighteousness (1 John 1.9). Christ’s command to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5.48) is meant to be taken seriously because God empowers people to do what he commands. For Wesley, “every command in Holy Writ is only a covered promise.”²⁴

To understand Wesley’s position, it is important to know what he meant by ‘perfection’. Accordingly, Victor Shepherd makes the helpful distinction between the Greek *teleios* (which captures Wesley’s use of ‘perfection’) and the Latin *perfectus*. While *perfectus* typically refers to things, *teleios* more characteristically refers to persons. Furthermore, *perfectus* is a fairly static term, which connotes faultlessness, of not admitting further development, while *teleios* is a highly nuanced term meaning ‘mature’, ‘complete’, or ‘whole’.²⁵ Wesley did not mean sinless perfection because a believer never outgrows the need for the atoning mediation of Christ.²⁶ Nor did perfection rule out continual growth into maturity and wholeness. Rather, “Scripture perfection is, pure love filling the heart, and governing all the words and actions.”²⁷ Again, “It is perfect love (1 John 4.18). . . its properties, or inseparable fruits, are, rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks (1 Thess. 5.16).”²⁸ Thus, for Wesley, the Christian life is a dynamic relationship of loving God with all of one’s being and doing.

A kingdom approach is also compromised whenever salvation is conceived primarily as being about the afterlife (under-realized eschatology) rather than being about God’s future kingdom invading the present. In his sermon, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, Wesley writes,

What is *salvation*? The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal

happiness. It is not the soul's going to paradise. ..It is not a blessing which lies on the other side [of] death, or (as we speak) in the other world. The very words of the text put this beyond question. 'Ye are saved.' [Eph. 2.8] It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing, a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of. ..²⁹

This passage would surprise anyone tempted (too hastily) to dismiss Wesley as a tent meeting revivalist interested only in saving souls. Actually, his understanding of salvation was profoundly holistic.³⁰ Certainly, salvation reconciles an individual's soul to God, but it involves exceedingly more than that. Wesley goes on to argue that justification leads naturally *and necessarily* (in this life) to sanctification—to doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God (Mic 6.8).³¹ Moreover, sanctification has corporate and social dimensions.³² Thus, salvation in its wholeness entails becoming part of the Church, which is conceived as a redemptive ethical fellowship with a mission to overcome the unholiness, alienation, and hopelessness of the present world.³³ It is no accident that Methodism became a potent agent of social change in America, bringing hope and empowerment to women, African Americans, and the working classes.³⁴

A number of Emerging Church leaders also advocate a return to kingdom living. Kimball argues that evangelistic efforts need to focus on disciple making, not merely conversion. He suggests that evangelists should give invitations into the kingdom, not just for the forgiveness of sins and entrance into heaven.³⁵ Scott Bader-Saye claims that there is a “conscious reframing of redemption in terms of the kingdom of God” in Emerging Church thought.³⁶ Salvation is conceived as being communal as well as individual and temporal as well as eternal. Evangelism is seen as a conversation, not a conquest or a project. Outreach entails both engaging postmodern culture and challenging it with kingdom values. Or as Bader-Saye puts it, “relevance must always walk hand in hand with resistance: incarnation must be balanced by the cross.”³⁷

One of the clearest endorsements of a return to a kingdom worldview is McLaren's book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*. McLaren explores the meaning of Jesus' message about the kingdom of God for the original Jewish hearers. He highlights the misunderstandings of various first-century Jewish religious and political groups, all of which believed that the kingdom of God would materialize only after the Romans were expelled or eliminated (though they differed as to how and when this would take place).³⁸ Common to each of these misunderstandings was the belief that the kingdom of God would restore sovereignty to a Jewish theocratic state. McLaren worries that modern American Evangelicalism has similarly bought into theocratic assumptions (he is particularly concerned about a theology of empire seeping into American thought). However, Jesus' message was not about establishing a theocratic

Christendom, though it did have political implications. He proclaimed a different kind of revolution, one in which the power of God is demonstrated through weakness, love, healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This kingdom operates subversively and sacrificially, not through (human) power and prestige.

A fourth commonality between Wesley and the Emerging Church is a spirit of ecumenism. In many ways, Wesley was a mediating theologian, both in thought and practice. He synthesized Eastern and Western Christianity, Catholicism and Protestantism, Calvinism and Arminianism, tradition and innovation, reason and experience, spirituality and service.³⁹ He brought together rich and poor, men and women, free and slave, and united Christians of various denominational commitments. A few examples will illustrate this point. First, Wesley's theological and spiritual influences were broad, from the patristic theologians of both East and West to Puritans like John Owen and Richard Baxter to mystics and moralists like Jeremy Taylor, Thomas à Kempis, and William Law; to reformation theologians such as Luther and Calvin.⁴⁰ Second, while he esteemed the insights of those who came before him, he was not afraid to challenge their views when he deemed it necessary. For Wesley, the key to fruitful theological dialogue is to seek agreement on the essentials and practice gracious tolerance on the non-essentials, not that one should avoid formulating opinions on these matters, but one should leave room for disagreement and tension. In his sermon on *Catholic Spirit*, Wesley writes, "Although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true is the same thing as not to hold it), yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions taken together are true."⁴¹ Such an approach allows one to maintain and articulate truth claims without demanding absolute agreement on every point. Thus, while disagreeing with the Calvinist George Whitefield on the doctrine of predestination, Wesley could affirm that in essential matters "there is not a hair's breadth difference between Mr. Wesley and Mr. Whitefield."⁴² Third, Wesley was deeply committed to unity and deplored schismatic intentions. In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he warns: "Beware of schism, of making a rent in the Church of Christ."⁴³ Wesley was emphatically not interested in starting a new denomination; his goal was renewal within the Church of England. Accordingly, he deliberately planned Methodist meetings on weeknights and Sunday evenings in order to avoid scheduling conflicts with regular church meetings. He also spoke out against those who advocated separating from the mainline Church.⁴⁴

Emerging Church leaders demonstrate a similar ecumenical spirit. By delving into the rich traditions of the Christian heritage, they hope to revitalize and deepen contemporary Christian spirituality. The subtitle of Kimball's book sums this up well: *Vintage Christianity for New Generations*. Similarly, McLaren promotes "looking for ways ahead for the Christian faith by looking

back at the same time.⁴⁵ Many in the Emerging Church feel that the modern Church (especially in Evangelicalism), in its attempt to make faith credible and relevant to modern people, has stripped Christian expression of its experiential, corporeal, historical and incarnational qualities. This is epitomized in the Seeker Sensitive service, which “often involves removing what could be considered religious stumbling blocks and displays of the spiritual (such as extended worship, religious symbols, extensive prayer times, liturgy, etc.). . .”⁴⁶ In Contrast, Kimball, proposes that an Emerging worship *gathering* (he dislikes the term *service*, which he believes has absorbed consumerist connotations), “promotes, rather than hides, full displays of spirituality . . .”⁴⁷ Thus, in the Emerging Church, there is a renewed interest in spirituality, tradition, liturgy, creeds, and sensual expressions of worship (i.e. the use of the arts and other visuals). Those who unfairly criticise the Emerging Church as being simply a trendy turn toward candles and incense fail to see these deep ecumenical convictions.

Another reason for the Emerging Church’s ecumenical spirit is a desire to transcend theological impasses of modern Christianity, to find a ‘third way’ by deconstructing modern dualisms.⁴⁸ In this endeavour, the Emerging Church is influenced by the postmodern critique of metanarratives, epitomized by thinkers like Jacques Derrida.⁴⁹ Scott Bader-Saye identifies three of these dualisms, including the liberal/conservative impasse, the traditional/contemporary worship impasse, and the cultural resistance/relevance (or withdrawal/syncretism) impasse.⁵⁰ A number of other dualisms could also be mentioned, such as theology/philosophy, method/mysticism, inclusive/exclusive soteriology, spirit/body, science/art, Catholic/Protestant, believing/belonging, evangelism/discipleship, and so forth.

III. Critique

Having surveyed a number of commonalities, it is now appropriate to consider what critical questions and concerns arise from a conversation between Wesley and the Emerging Church. Before proceeding, it should be stated that the following criticisms will not apply equally to all who identify themselves with the Emerging Church, and, to a degree, making general assertions will be unfair to some. On the other hand, since its advocates have resisted a clearly defined identity, whether in terms of doctrine or membership, the Emerging Church has left itself open to such a critique (recall that ‘conversation’ is their preferred designation, not movement, ideology, or model).⁵¹

First, in its ecumenical ardour, the Emerging Church tends to settle for theological superficiality. In seeking to be broad, it sacrifices depth and ends up promoting a sort of theological smorgasbord. This weakness is clearly evident in the book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, in which McLaren mines a wide spectrum of traditions and theologies in order to construct his own blend of

Christian orthodoxy. While his spirit of creativity and charity is inspiring, I am inclined to conclude with D. A. Carson that McLaren, in several instances, misrepresents the traditions from which he claims to draw.⁵² For example, McLaren is clearly not a Calvinist or a fundamentalist, yet he claims these titles for himself by redefining their meaning. By means of subtle word-play, McLaren identifies with these traditions by ignoring their distinctiveness. In effect, he achieves unity by erasing diversity (which ironically seems a very un-postmodern thing to do!). Now if the leaders of the Emerging Church fail to achieve depth, their followers fair much worse. Robert Webber, who is sympathetic with the movement, expressed his disappointment with an Emergent Convention he attended: “There’s nothing here in the public face that lifts you theologically or lifts you into liturgy or anything that has historic connection or depth or substance.”⁵³ Even the leaders of the Emerging Church were uncomfortable with the conference, but perhaps this discomfort ought to challenge their deliberate avoidance of clarity.

Wesley also interacts with various traditions and theologies, but in contrast to the Emerging Church, he recognizes the complexities and difficulties involved in such an endeavour. Wesley argues that true catholicity is not “speculative latitudinarianism.” It is not indifference to all opinions, nor is it wavering between options or blending truths together. Such inconsistency does not amount to catholicity but demonstrates “a muddy understanding.”⁵⁴ Wesley was successful as a mediating theologian precisely because he knew where he stood. True dialogue necessitates reflective self-awareness. It means knowing what one believes, what others believe, what is the common ground, and what are the differences. Perhaps the best way for the Emerging Church to make a contribution in this area is simply to bring conversation partners together and facilitate genuine dialogue.⁵⁵

Second, the Emerging Church overstates the importance of experience in religion and downplays other means of attaining religious knowledge. One frequently encounters calls to abandon propositional approaches to truth in favour of experiential ones. To defend his own experiential and contextual approach, McLaren appeals to Michael Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowledge. A musician playing a musical piece does not focus consciously on her instrument (i.e. on the rudimentary techniques involved in playing), but rather indwells the instrument tacitly and through it attends to the notes. Similarly, McLaren sees orthodoxy as “a kind of internalized belief, tacit and personal, that becomes part of you to such a degree that once assimilated, you hardly need to think of it.”⁵⁶ But McLaren’s application of Polanyi misses the mark. Indeed, it is true that a great musician does indwell her instrument tacitly, but this is only possible because she has spent countless hours in rigorous practice and diligent attendance to technical details (including studying music theory). It seems that McLaren skips the details and jumps straight

into tacit indwelling, which is rather like a beginner pianist trying to play an advanced concerto.

McLaren is convinced that orthodoxy in the postmodern context “will have to grow out of the experience of the post-Christian [meaning post-Christendom], post-secular people of the cities of the twenty-first century.”⁵⁷ This preference for experience is in keeping with its postmodern leanings. If the modern approach to religion can be summed up with Kant’s refrain, “Dare to know!” the postmodern slogan might be “Dare to experience!”⁵⁸ However, such a contextual approach would quickly (albeit unintentionally) reduce theology to anthropology, and ecclesiology to sociology. As an extreme example of this, an Emerging Church in New Zealand is founded upon a ‘communitarian hermeneutic,’ in which “authority has shifted, now located neither in scripture nor in tradition, but in the identity of the group as a community.”⁵⁹

John Wesley also placed a great value on religious experience, rejecting the sterile rationalism of eighteenth-century deism. He stressed personal conversion, inward assurance, and the cultivation of perfect love for God. The Wesleyan hymns passionately and coherently expressed these convictions, warming both heart and mind. He also understood the importance of communal religious experience, which was reflected in his Methodist societies. Furthermore, after reading Jonathan Edwards, he became convinced that unusual outbursts and manifestations during worship were legitimate expressions of the work of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰ However, Wesley did not overemphasize the role of religious experience. In pursuing religious knowledge, he advocated a synthesis of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (with Scripture being primary and the others aiding its interpretation and application).⁶¹ This later came to be known as the Wesleyan quadrilateral.⁶² Accordingly, he structured his societies in such a way as to attend to each of these elements. As D. Michael Henderson shows, Wesley’s class system was brilliantly conceived to affect holistic transformative change. Wesley provided a venue to foster the sanctification of the whole person through participation in the interlocking groups of society (cognitive mode), class (behavioural mode), band (affective mode), select society (training mode), and penitent bands (rehabilitative mode).⁶³ The Emerging Church would do well to follow Wesley’s example of a balanced approach to religious knowledge.

Third, there is an unfortunate tendency in the Emerging Church toward being culturally trendy. In the spirit of Schleiermacher, the Emerging Church is trying to reach contemporary ‘cultured despisers’ of modern Christianity.⁶⁴ Along these lines, Andy Crouch describes the Emerging Church as being “entangled with the self-conscious cutting edge of U.S. culture.” He characterizes the demographics of Emerging churches as “frequently urban, disproportionately young, overwhelmingly white, and very new—few have

been in existence for more than five years.”⁶⁵ Philip Harrold quotes one Emerging Church blogger, who admits that the Emerging Church is caught up in what he calls “hepatitis [sic], an addiction to a smug coolness and hipness.”⁶⁶

This desire to be fashionable sometimes leads to an elitist mentality which results in a reactionary departure from traditional Evangelicalism. Those who agree with Emerging Church views are included in the “conversation,” while those who disagree simply “don’t get it.” As Harrold points out, one of the common features of Emerging Church enthusiasts is the experience of ‘deconversion’, a process of disillusionment with the traditional Church, usually due to intellectual doubt or moral criticism.⁶⁷ Accounts of deconversion are common in Emerging literature and often are formulated as ‘narratives of disaffiliation’, recounting how someone valiantly overcame barriers erected by the traditional Church and discovered a more authentic experience of Christian expression and community.⁶⁸

Wesley, by contrast, was suspicious of a bourgeois approach to Christian faith. His spiritual journey was quite different from many in the Emerging Church; he began among the educated elite at Oxford but later found his true calling among the poor, the ostracised, the sick, the imprisoned, and the common people of England.⁶⁹ He counselled others to do likewise, instructing his assistant preachers to go not where they desired, nor where they would be comfortable, but rather where they were most needed (i.e. among the poor). Furthermore, Wesley was a practical man and was more interested in putting faith into practice than being preoccupied with theoretical discussions about the latest ideas. He disliked ‘speechifying’, or sermons which probed abstract or obscure doctrines but were weak in application and failed to inspire in hearers a commitment to action. Wesley always had the common person in mind.

Wesley’s ministry among the poor and lowly classes was extremely fruitful. As people accepted the gospel and devoted themselves to kingdom principles, they discovered new freedom to change their plight. Alcoholics recovered and found work. Criminals repented and social conditions improved. Lower class labourers began to save their money and prospered. However, as people climbed the social ladder, Wesley noticed a disturbing trend. As affluence increased, motivation to do good works decreased and spiritual apathy began to settle in. Wesley protested, “What hinders? Do you fear spoiling your silken coat?”⁷⁰ The gospel had lifted them out of their destitute condition, given them hope and inspired resourcefulness and prosperity. But now this same material comfort, which they received by sheer grace through the gospel, filled them with pride and indifference and prevented them from reaching out to others. Thus, Wesley came to a poignant understanding of the ambiguity of wealth and influence.⁷¹ Such things are profitable so long as

they are pursued with humility and shared generously; indeed, Wesley counselled: Earn all you can, save all you can, *but most importantly give all you can!*⁷² The Emerging Church could stand to benefit from Wesley's insight here and develop a more critical stance concerning the dangers of being trendy or cultured.

IV. Wesley's Contribution to the Conversation

A dialogue with Wesley's theology raises several implications for the Emerging Church. First, the spirit of renewal in the Emerging Church and its desire to recapture an authentic experience of ancient-future Christianity should be applauded. Second, its evangelistic fervour should be affirmed, as emerging generations, previously alienated from mainstream Evangelicalism, are resonating with the Emerging Church's message and re-connecting with Christian communities. Third, the creativity and innovation evident in the Emerging Church's best leaders should be encouraged. Finally, while the movement has great potential, it is also in need of guidance, correction, and accountability. Particularly, I suggest that Wesley's theology and ministry offer the following exhortations to the Emerging Church:

1. *Stay intimately connected with the traditional, established Church.*⁷³

Throughout his lifetime, Wesley cautioned against schism and separation. He believed that Methodism would remain a more powerful force as a renewal movement, a counter-voice within the larger Church of England, than as a religious establishment in its own right. This conviction was warranted because as Methodism developed into its own denomination after Wesley's death it became increasingly institutional and eventually lost much of its original transformative power. This seems to be a pattern for many Protestant groups which begin as radical agents of change but subsequently lose their power when they become an end in themselves (rather than remaining in dialectical tension with the established Church).⁷⁴ Thus, the caution arises that if a dialectical tension between the Emerging Church and the traditional Church is lost, what is now innovative will inevitably become the establishment (and both parties will lose an opportunity for growth).⁷⁵ Therefore, the Emerging Church should intentionally build relationships with traditional evangelical churches (and vice-versa) and engage in genuine dialogue with mainstream evangelical theologians.⁷⁶

2. *Be rigorously disciplined in the pursuit of truth.*

While some postmodern thinkers have provided a necessary and helpful critique of modernity, at the popular level, postmodernism tends to open a door to intellectual laziness, theological fence-sitting, and experientially-fixated spirituality. Both modern and postmodern culture are incredibly complex

and understanding their nuances and subtleties is exceedingly difficult.⁷⁷ One wonders whether much of the popular discussion of postmodernity has left people confused and paralyzed, afraid to commit or take a stand on important issues of truth (this is not to deny that, for some, postmodernism has brought freedom from legalistic moralism or oppressive fundamentalism). Wesley offered an integrated approach to truth, positing a dialogical synthesis of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In addition, he recognised the importance of mystery and tension in seeking religious knowledge but equally stressed the need for assurance, conviction, and commitment. In describing our relationship to truth, he would side with Gadamer over Derrida: truth is ‘inexhaustible’, not ‘undecidable’⁷⁸

3. *Be wholeheartedly diligent in the pursuit of holiness.*

What ultimately drove Wesley’s passion to renew the Church and reach out to his nation was not a desire to be cultured or relevant but a zeal for Christian perfection or wholeness, defined in terms of ardent love and insatiable desire for God. This love for God wells up in one’s heart and overflows in loving outreach to one’s neighbour. Such an emphasis on holiness, or perfection in love, could help ensure a proper perspective of our (i.e. the Church’s) role in God’s redemptive work. God initiates, we respond; God opens hearts and minds, we bear witness and serve. Furthermore, since holiness and unity are intimately linked together (Wesley’s insight that Christian perfection is a corporate reality reflects the New Testament teaching that the *Holy Spirit* is the bond of unity in the Church), the pursuit of Spirit-holiness also protects us against pride and division. As we draw near to God, we will also draw near to one another. Loving God includes loving others. Finally, fulfilling the Great Commission involves much more than communicating ideas about God in relevant, postmodern ways. It means pursuing and experiencing the transformative power of God’s sanctifying love and living out that reality sacrificially and concretely in our world.

End Notes

1. John Drane, “The Emerging Church,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* [hereafter *IJSCC*] 6, no. 1 (2006): 3.

2. In North America, Brian McLaren is widely regarded to be the *de-facto* leader of the Emerging Church [hereafter designated EC]. Other recognized voices include Tony Jones, Dan Kimball, Leonard Sweet and Rob Bell. Theologians such as Stan Grenz, N. T. Wright, Robert Webber, and Dallas Willard have influenced the thought of EC leaders.

3. For other examples of ‘emerging’ expressions of church, see Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shape of Things to Come: Innovation and Ministry for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003); and Steve Taylor, *the out of bounds church? Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change* (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties/Zondervan: 2005).

4. Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 14-15.

5. For greater detail on these values and their accompanying practices, see <http://www.emergentvillage.com>.

6. While Wesley and the Methodist revival resisted certain aspects of the Enlightenment (i.e. rationalism, a benevolent view of the nature of man, naturalistic assumptions, etc.), Wesley was still a man of his times and thus also a product of the Enlightenment. According to Henry D. Rack, his thinking was consistent with eighteenth century empiricism and his appeal to experience resonated with the emerging Romanticism. Thus, Rack refers to Wesley as a “reasonable enthusiast,” being “rational in form but enthusiast in substance” (*Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd ed. [London: Lipworth Press, 2002], 32-33, 167-169, 383-388). See also F. Dreyer, “Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley,” *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 12-30.

7. Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 34.

8. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart: John Wesley, the Evangelist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 9.

9. John Wesley, “Sermon on the Mount, Discourse IV,” in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* (eds., Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), pp. 195, 198.

10. William Abraham, “Saving Souls in the Twenty-First Century: A Missiological Midrash on John Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* [hereafter *WTJ*] 38, no. 1 (2003): 12.

11. In his fictional *New Kind of Christian* series, McLaren attempts to articulate both the disenchantment of contemporary people with modern Christianity and the hope of a renewed Christianity contextualized for postmodern seekers (*A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

12. For an introduction to postmodernism commonly cited by Emerging Church writers, see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). For a more scholarly introduction, see K. Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-25. Vanhoozer identifies six descriptors of the postmodern condition, including (see 14-18): (1) the contextualization of reason within particular cultures and times; (2) a protest against the modern concept of “the natural” (what we regard as natural is historically and politically conditioned); (3) a rejection of metanarratives, which according to Lyotard breed totalitarian systems; (4) an embrace of the “other” or the oppressed; (5) a recovery of “the beyond,” a post-secular embrace of prophetic and mystical discourse; and (6) a refusal of Christian orthodoxy.

13. For example, Brian McLaren writes, “A Warning: as in most of my other books, there are places here where I have gone out of my way to be provocative, mischievous, and unclear, reflecting my belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) often stimulate more thought than clarity” (*A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical +*

charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 22-23.

14. For a critique of the FC's analysis of culture, see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 57-86, 125-156.

15. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* [hereafter *WJW*], vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 103.

16. Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 95. However, Stephen Tomkins points out that Wesley's Aldersgate experience, while powerful, did not put to rest all of his doubts. Perhaps more formative was Wesley's encounter and partnership with George Whitefield and the experience of outdoor preaching (*John Wesley: A Biography* [Grand Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003], 66ff). See also H. P. Heitzenrater, "Wesley, John (1703-1791)," in the *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (ed. Timothy Larsen; Leicester / Downer's Grove: IVP: 2003), 713.

17. Wood, *The Burning Heart*, 79, 117, 137. See also John Wesley, "A Short History of the People Called Methodists," *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9 (Bicentennial Edition [hereafter *WJW-BE*]; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 425-503.

18. Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 13-14.

19. *Ibid.*, 25. However, Kimball distinguishes the best innovators of the seeker approach (i.e. Rick Warren) from those who employ a 'one size fits all' church strategy.

20. *Ibid.*, 94. Kimball borrows this phrase from George Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (ed. Darrell L. Guder; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 108.

21. Kimball discusses these shifting values in *Emerging Church*, 105, 175, 201, 215.

22. Brian D. McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 52.

23. Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 114.

24. Wesley, "Sermon on the Mount, Discourse V," *Wesley's Sermons*, 211.

25. Victor Shepherd, *Can You Find Anything More Amiable Than This? Anything More Desirable? A Note on Wesley's Challenge Concerning Christian Perfection*, 11, <http://www.victorshepherd.on.ca/Wesley/newpage128.htm>.

26. Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," *WJW*, vol. 11 (1958), 417.

27. *Ibid.*, 401.

28. *Ibid.*, 442.

29. Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Wesley's Sermons*, 372.

30. Perhaps 'integrated' is a better term, since it avoids the New Age connotations and philosophical baggage of 'holism'. See Charles Ringma, "Holistic

Ministry and Mission: A Call for Reconceptualization," *Missiology* 32, no. 4 (2004): 435-438.

31. *Wesley's Sermons*, 373.

32. Stephen Rankin, "A Perfect Church: Toward a Wesleyan Missional Ecclesiology," *WTJ* 38, no. 1 (2003): 87, 103.

33. Leon O. Hynson, *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley's Ethics* (Nappanee: Francis Asbury Press, 1984), 127, 129.

34. For a detailed account of American Methodism's impact on such groups, see Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 99-183.

35. Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 203.

36. Scott Bader-Saye, "Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation," *IJSCC* 6, no. 1 (2006): 18-19.

37. *Ibid.*, 20.

38. McLaren mentions three views: military conquest (Zealots), moral transformation (Pharisees), and political compromise (Herodians and Sadducees). *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* (Nashville: W. Publishing Group, 2006).

39. To explore these connections further, see John H. Wright, and J. Douglas Harrison, "The Ecclesial Practice of Reconciliation and the End of the Wesleyan," *WTJ* 37, no. 2 (2002): 194-214; Owen Cummings, "John Wesley and Eucharistic Ecclesiology," *One in Christ* 35, no. 2 (1999): 143-151; and, Geoffrey Wainwright, "Methodism's Ecclesial Location and Ecumenical Vision," *One in Christ* 19, no. 2 (1983): 104-134.

40. Wesley's *Christian Library* included fifty books from a variety of sources and traditions.

41. Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," *Wesley's Sermons*, 302.

42. Wesley, "What is an Arminian?" *WJW*, vol. 10 (1958), p. 359. Wesley agreed with Calvinism on original sin and justification by faith alone, and his doctrine of preventing/prevenient grace protected him against the charge of Pelagianism.

43. Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," 433.

44. Wesley, "Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England," *WJW-BE*, vol. 9 (1989), 332-349.

45. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 18.

46. Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 25.

47. *Ibid.*, 26.

48. The subtitle of McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy*, though somewhat convoluted, expresses this intention to transcend dualisms.

49. One of the basic features of Derrida's deconstruction is to expose totalizing tendencies by demonstrating that the logic of a particular text or idea undoes itself in the paradoxes and contradictions inherent within it. While the traditional mode of reading attends to that which is presented, deconstruction attempts to extract what is absent or latent. See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1-27.

50. Bader-Saye, "Improvising Church," 18-19.

51. Could this resistance to clarity be an avoidance of theological accountability? Calvin observed that ambiguity of expression can be a kind of hiding place. See *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.XIII.4-5 (ed. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 112.

52. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 157-182.

53. Scott Bader-Saye, "The Emergent Matrix," *Christian Century* 121, no. 24 (2004): 20. Bader-Saye comments, "the Emergent music was hipper, the videos faster, the clothes trendier, the technology more sophisticated. But for many of the Emergent leaders, the convention's flashiness did more to confuse than to clarify the nature of the emerging church."

54. Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," 307-308.

55. A good start is Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006). Anderson seeks to articulate a constructive and practical emergent theology for emerging churches.

56. *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 33.

57. *Ibid.*, 92.

58. Interestingly (and perhaps worthy of reflection), this theme of 'daring' to be different is common in EC literature. At its best it reflects innovation and creativity of spirit but it could, if unchecked, degenerate into an elitist sort of martyr complex. For example, McLaren slyly warns his reader: "You are about to begin an absurd and ridiculous book." See *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 27. Matthew Guest and Steve Taylor approvingly quote an Emerging Church document which says, "We have discovered a source of hope and excitement among newly emergent communities of faith...who have dared to exercise creativity and imagination in their pursuit of Christ..." (emphasis mine) ("The Post-Evangelical Emerging Church: Innovations in New Zealand and the UK," *IJSCC* 6, no. 1 [March, 2006]: 50). Philip Harrold cites examples of people referring to their transition to Emerging Church contexts as 'outgrowing', 'wrestling with', 'disentangling from', or 'being wrenched out of' traditional church contexts ("Deconversion in the Emerging Church," *IJSCC* 6, no. 1 [March, 2006]: 84).

59. Guest and Taylor, "The Post-Evangelical Emerging Church," 59.

60. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 24. Specifically, Wesley approved of Edwards' *The Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God, in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton*.

61. Randy L. Maddox suggests that Wesley's quadrilateral could be described as "a unilateral rule of Scripture within a trilateral hermeneutic of reason, tradition, and experience" (*Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* [Nashville: Kingswood Books / Abingdon Press, 1994], 46).

62. For a more detailed discussion of Wesley's use of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience, see *Ibid.*, 36-47.

63. D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), chapter 3. See also Bruce C. Robbins and David Carter, "Connexionalism and *Koinonia*: A Wesleyan Contribution to Ecclesiology," *One in Christ* 34, no. 4 (1998): 320-336.

64. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (trans. John Oman; Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994). Several similarities exist between the EC and the Romantic spirituality of the early Schleiermacher,

including an emphasis on ‘feeling’, a disdain for rationalism or ‘cold arguing’, a rejection of perceived legalism, an intuition for the inter-connectivity of all things, and a distrust of institutional religion. Also, notice the similarities in Schleiermacher’s audience: they are well-to-do, middle class, educated people; they appear to be relatively moral and just; and they object to religion (especially the established Church), regarding it as corrupt, unenlightened, and narrow. Bader-Saye also notices a trend toward “neo-Romanticism” (“Improvising Church,” 17).

65. Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today* 48, no. 11 (2004): 37

66. Harrold, “Deconversion in the Emerging Church,” 86. Granted, traditional evangelical churches also succumb to fads, namely those of popular Christian sub-culture.

67. *Ibid.*, 81-83.

68. *Ibid.*, 84-86.

69. However, even at Oxford Wesley served among such people.

70. Quoted by Victor Shepherd, *John Wesley (1703-1791): Features of His Spirituality*, 7, <http://www.victorshepherd.on.ca/Wesley/>

71. Similarly, Francis Asbury was cautious about building chapels: “[It will] make rich men necessary and they will rule you and impede your discipline if you are not well aware.” Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 159.

72. *Ibid.*, 156.

73. This applies particularly to ‘post-church’ groups discussed by Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* and Alan Jamieson, “Post-Church Groups and Their Place as Emergent Forms of Church,” *IJSCC* 6, no. 1 (2006): 65-78.

74. Roman Catholicism is, perhaps, less inclined toward division because it has room within the mainline institution for renewal groups and counter-movements (i.e. various monastic orders and convents, mystics, spiritual directors, etc.), allowing for a healthy dialectical tension and a richness of diversity within unity.

75. In a recent article, K. Steve McCormick discusses the significance of Spirit-Christology for maintaining a healthy tension in ecclesiology between institutional and fluid elements, tradition and innovation, unity and diversity, familiarity and otherness. He argues that the Church’s being and mission are *constituted* by the Spirit and *instituted* by Christ. Overlooking the former leads to uniformity and control, while overlooking the latter leads to an unhealthy tendency toward distinctiveness and novelty (“The Church an Icon of the Holy Trinity? A Spirit-Christology as Necessary Prolegomena of Ecclesiology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 41, no. 2 [Spring, 2006]: 227-241).

76. Anderson stresses both continuity and discontinuity with the traditional Church: “Emerging churches must continually argue their theological continuity with Christ in the context of critical discontinuity with religious forms and traditions....” (Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 28).

77. Popular postmodern writers often underestimate the complexity of modernity and their attacks on it tend to be one-sided (modernity has benefits too—technology, medical discoveries, democracy, etc.). They also fail to acknowledge how deeply modernity is entrenched in Western culture. See William

Edgar, "No News is Good News: Modernity, the Postmodern, and Apologetics," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 376.

78. Cited by Stephen M. Feldman, "Made for Each Other: The Interdependence of Deconstruction and Philosophical Hermeneutics," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 26, no. 1 (January, 2000): 67. Feldman provides a stimulating discussion of the similarities and differences between philosophical hermeneutics and deconstruction. The claim that 'inexhaustibility' is more faithful to the Wesleyan quadrilateral than 'undecidability' is my own persuasion; Feldman grants equal value to both.