**20 Characteristics of Wesleyan Spiritual Theology**

**A Gracious Principle**

Grace—prevenient, atoning, saving, sanctifying, perfecting, grace—is so foundational to Wesleyan thought that no one within the movement would ever dream of basing the forgiveness of sins upon anything except the free grace of God expressed in the redemptive work of Christ. It is God’s initiative that makes possible human response to divine grace. Salvation is never to be attained, but obtained by grace alone.

**Salvation Is the Aim**

Wesleyan-Holiness soteriology (study of salvation) is not about mental health, psychological adjustment or shallow activism, but full salvation from sin and restoration of Christlikeness. We need look no farther than the newscast or our own hearts to know that something has gone terribly wrong with the human enterprise. Sin is its Bible name, and Wesleyan soteriology is dealing with the sin problem at a profound, not surface, level. Wesley said:

By salvation I mean, not barely . . .deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth. (From Works, 8:47)

**A Spirituality of Radical Optimism**

The Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification is radically more optimistic than scientific behaviorism, determinism, Freudian psychology, stimulus-response, and conditioning education—and much more optimistic than classic Protestantism. The social sciences dismiss the idea of sin. Classic Protestantism—Luther and Calvin— declares that inner sin will plague the believer as long as he or she lives. The optimism of Wesleyan-Holiness teaching is deliverance from all sin. They believe the Bible is serious when it says the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin and that the Holy Spirit purifies hearts by faith (1 Jn 1 and Acts 8).

**Wesleyanism Has an Ecumenical Spirit**

What Christians have in common in Christ is more important than sectarian peculiarities. Wesley urges, in his sermon, The Catholic Spirit, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?” (From Sermons on Several Occasions, London: Wesleyan-Methodist Book Room, n. d., 549)

**A Biblical Foundation**

A spirituality based on the “sufficiency” of scripture, and not the Fundamentalist “paper pope” view of the Bible is what has helped the Wesleyan-Holiness movement move ahead. The Wesleyan use of the Bible is wide-scoped and tries to deal with the general tenor of Scripture and not “proof texts” collected to make a point. J. Kenneth Grider declares that “Wesleyan theology is biblical, but not narrowly so . . . . It views Scripture through its wide-angle lens . . .as it applies Scripture to a given time . . .and culture . . .after making allowances for the differences between Bible times and our own.”   [From “The Nature of Wesleyan Theology,” Wesleyan Theological Journal, 17, No. 2 (Fall, 1982) 48, 50]

***A Christ-centered Focus***

Jesus Christ, the crucified, resurrected, redeemer is at the heart of Wesleyan spirituality. The Holy Spirit is commonly referred to as the Holy Spirit of Christ—the two are inseparable. For a time some branches of the Holiness Movement drifted into a fascination of spiritual phenomena with unhappy results. “In a hundred different ways on a thousand different occasions, decade after five decades, his [Wesley’s] message was . . . Christus crucifixus, Christus redemptor, Christus victor.” [From Albert Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit, Nashville: Tidings, 1975) 45]

**A Synthetic Method**

The Wesleyan spiritual journey is guided by revelation, reason, tradition, and experience (the Wesleyan Quadrilateral). Wesley’s Theological Method was synthetic. That is, he borrowed truth and insights wherever he might find them and braided them into a practical theology. Thus, it was non-sectarian in nature. He did not mind borrowing from the best thinkers of history whether they be Greek Fathers, English ethicists or German pietists.

**A Dynamic Character**

Though the Bible is complete, the Holy Spirit of Christ continues to reveal insights to pastors, leaders and individual Christians about how and what to do in new life settings and situations. Further, the enemies of the Faith mount newly aimed opposition movements. When New Age notions blossom, when UFO cults, Islamic Fundamentalists, and same-sex marriage devotees, cloning issues crest like ocean waves theology cannot just repeat the same old things that served as guideposts when the Crusades or the budding missionary movement held sway. Theology must respond to what scientists are doing in outer space and to what psychiatrists are doing in inner space Thus, Wesleyan theology is always on the “grow.” No final Wesleyan-Holiness theology will be found that will speak to all situations in ironclad finality.  (From Grider, WTJ, 51)

**Highly Values Spiritual Experience**

In Wesleyan-Holiness churches the requirement for membership is not reciting the catechism, but testifying to an “experience” of conversion. Wesleyan-Holiness spirituality takes seriously the witness of assurance of the Spirit, God’s Spirit witnessing with our spirit that we are children of God.

This emphasis on experience and heart-felt religion means that Wesleyan educators take seriously the affective domain—the realm of the emotions, attitudes, and values. That is one reason that every lesson of this course on spiritual formation has an affective objective.

Charles Wesley wrote:

I felt my Lord’s atoning blood

Close to my soul applied;

Me, me, He loved—the Son of God

For me, for me, He died.

[From “For the Anniversary of One’s Conversion” Quoted by Henry Bett, The Spirit of Methodism (London: Epworth Press, 1937), 26]

**Wesleyan-Holiness Spirituality Values Christian Ethics**

The moral and ethical agenda appropriate for Christlike believers is highly regarded. Wesleyan spirituality is not designed for the hermit, the lonely acetic fighting evil spirits in the desert sun. Rather it is spirituality for the “crowded ways of life.” And how we conduct ourselves in community does affect others.

**Wesleyan Spiritual Theology Has a Magnetic Attraction to the Poor and Oppressed**

Private piety that clings to Jesus and ignores the human agonies of the world is foreign to the Wesleyan spirit. As already demonstrated in this course, service to the poor, sick, and oppressed is as much a spiritual discipline as prayer to those who breathe the Wesleyan spirit.

**Mutual Guidance, Accountability, and Encouragement Through Small Groups**

“Christian Conference,” as Wesley called it, “is an essential part of the genius of the Wesleyan movement. God has given us to each other to strengthen each other’s hands,” Wesley taught. No spirituality can claim to be truly Wesleyan without this important emphasis.

**The Church as Community**

The church is not isolated individual Christians, but the community of faith is the new temple of the Lord. Wesley said that the only holiness he knew was social holiness. That is to say, worship and the spiritual life are matters of community, the church community, the Christian family, and the larger community in the world.

**Prayer, Meditation, and Devotional Reading**

These are always stressed in a truly Wesleyan spirituality. Wesley promoted private and public prayer and prayer meetings. He practiced and taught the use of written and extemporaneous prayer in private devotion and corporate worship.

**Christian Service Is an Essential Spiritual Discipline**

John Wesley declared that true Christianity brought with it a “hungering and thirsting to do good of every possible kind.” (From Works 8:352) He believed that all Methodists wanted to “feed the hungry, cover the naked with a garment and give the poor a way of supplying their own wants for the time to come.” (From Works 7:286) Living for others is the self-transcendence of Wesleyan-Holiness spirituality.

**Self-examination and Self-knowledge**

These are important elements in Wesleyan spirituality. “Know your disease; know your cure” Wesley often said.

**Self-surrender and Self-transcendence the Key to Holy Living**

The secret to the holy life is self-surrender, always has been, always will be. Wesley carefully taught full-surrender, but not the destruction of the personality. God is not at war with our humanity. We surrender to His redeeming love; we do not try to give up being a self, a person.

**Pure Hearts, Attitudes, and Motives**

Wesley sought purity of intention, knowing that perfect performance was beyond all members of our fallen race. But the springs of the heart can be made pure and made to flow as a pure stream as far as intention, motive, and attitude are concerned.

**Detachment from the World**

Upward mobility is a “religion” for sinners. The theology of prosperity is the radical opposite of the Wesleyan ethos. We worship, love, and serve not the created, but the Creator.

**Holiness, Christian Perfection as Love**

Love is the essence of the holiness that Wesley taught. Not legalism or doctrinaire orthodoxy, but rather to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself is the path toward Christian perfection.