

Transformational Theology Praxis in the Wesleyan Tradition

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Abstract

In theology, praxis refers to the application of religious doctrines and ethics to daily life. It is, in some ways, applied belief. The premise is that following one's religious convictions allows one to live a just life. Nowhere is this more exemplified in the Wesleyan framework, which assesses that holiness before God and man is the logical consequence of true theology. Indeed, the assertion of the significance of praxis in theological action is a common feature of modern yearnings for a religious renaissance across denominations. Therefore, this article aims to evaluate the transformational theology praxis in the Wesleyan tradition, and the Methodist church in extension. This article uses a qualitative methodology. The article utilizes secondary data from scholarly articles in journals, church history tomes and church records. The data is presented in themes and patterns. The article concludes that in today's increasingly multicultural culture, Wesleyan Theology praxis forms the bedrock and superstructure for creating inclusivity in the ministry of the local church. This article recommends that modern methodism dedicates itself to the core of transformational Wesleyan praxis, which includes establishing liturgies, structuring worship, expounding the faith, and developing catechisms.

Keywords

Transformational Theology, Praxis, Wesleyan Tradition, Community, Culture

1. Introduction

An affirmation of the primacy of practice would imply that no matter how abstract, real theological thought should be brought down to foundational matters like liturgical construction and congregational care (Boff, 1988, 2009). There-

fore, the underlying flaw in the dominant academic paradigm of bible teaching is it does not leave the sky up there, and comes down to the realm of the anthropological where the nitty gritty of life is transacted and lived. It gets preoccupied with abstractions and concerns of doctrinal correctness, ignoring practical objectives that real theory is supposed to serve (Maddox, 1994). John Wesley's transformational theology praxis has immense application for the church today. His theology was anchored in respect for diversity, philanthropy, transformation, corroboration and context. In addition, it called for a comprehensive approach to the human condition. These were all anchored in the bible, which he believed, like Luther before him, was the standard for faith and practice.

These Wesleyan traditions are a clear representation of his transformational theology praxis, as a brief look into their historicity will affirm. First, in his 1781 book "A Short History of the People Called Methodists," John Wesley detailed how the Methodist movement began as three "rises of Methodism" before the actual commencement in April 1739 in Bristol. This description is significant because Wesley commented on how Methodism began to look back forty years later after it had grown into a well-developed and significant organization. Using the phrase "rises of Methodism," Wesley considered his efforts secondary to God's primary drive (Baker, 1984). According to Wesley, the first surge of Methodism was Oxford Methodism. Students and faculty at the University established small groups for prayer, Bible reading, and the Patristics. Small groups had been well established at Oxford from the late 1600s (Heitzenrater, 2013), and the Wesleys' were aware of the roots of the small group movement, which sprang from continental pietistic groups and Catholic lay orders and mystics. When John and Charles Wesley founded the "Holy Club" in November 1729, it followed a similar pattern, but by prioritizing this work, Wesley became known as the principal leader of the small group movement (Thaarup, 2019).

In 1736, Savannah, America, saw the second development of Methodism (Wesley 1744). Wesley established a parishioner community in the colony of Frederica, far from the universities and the diversity of religious groups in Britain. Methodism's third surge began on May 1st, 1738, in London. Wesley and Moravian Peter B'bler created the Fetter Lane Society. This society's concept was essentially identical to Moravian societies (Watson, 2002), including forming smaller groupings known as Bands. Although Wesley and a few members eventually withdrew from the Fetter Lane Group owing to the typical Moravian dominance of tranquility and antinomianism (Heitzenrater, 2013), Wesley regarded this society as Methodism's third moulding influence.

The formation of personal communities and an emphasis on holding individuals responsible for their commitment to being Disciples of Christ were shared by all three pre-Methodist occurrences, resulting in the practice of practical theology. The establishment of the New Room Society in Bristol in 1739 signaled a new chapter in the Methodist Movement. Groups quickly followed the Foundry society in London in Kingswood and Newcastle. Two years later, at the New Room society in Bristol, Wesley organized Classes and Bands. Wesley provided

the foundation for this fresh beginning with his General Regulations, which became the rules for Methodism as the movement spread across the United Kingdom (Thaarup, 2019). Accordingly, onwards he forged, with diversity, transformation, context and comprehensiveness, all anchored in the bible, being the hallmarks of his theology. Consequently, this paper intends to evaluate John Wesley's transformation theology praxis and its application in the Methodist church today.

2. Problem Statement

The praxis of Wesleyan traditions should entail various practices for a healthy Wesleyan congregation in the present diverse Methodist faiths; such practices include establishing a loving and welcoming spiritual community. This approach implies believers from varied traditions congregate and are provided with hospitality and are made to feel free in whichever ecclesia they chose to associate with. Indeed, this is the correct reaction to a socially varied neighborhood. Instead of segregating Christians from different cultures, the Wesleyan congregation welcomes everybody, a dramatic emblem of the transformational power of the Christian message to break down barriers (Sheffield, 2014). However, some of the transformational theological praxis of Wesleyan traditions and the present Methodist church have been abandoned. Accordingly, there is a disconnect between the pristine Wesleyan Methodism, and modern day Methodist praxis. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the praxis of Wesleyan traditions and extrapolate them into the present Methodist church. Accordingly, this paper intends to answer the question: what is the Wesleyan approach in terms of transformational theology praxis, and what is its application to the broader Methodism today?

3. Objective

The main objective of this article is to evaluate the transformational theological praxis of Wesleyan traditions and the present day Methodist church by extension.

4. Research Question

What are some of the transformational theological praxis of Wesleyan traditions and in the Methodist church by extension?

5. Methods

The article uses secondary data from scholarly articles in journals, church history tomes and church records. The data is presented in themes and patterns.

6. Discussions

During Wesley's days, Methodism characteristics included: The character of ecclesiology in ecclesia structure, Methodist organizations were split into Classes

and Bands. This organization reflects Wesleyan teaching on responsible discipleship and sanctification, as well as rigorous and restricted membership. Methodists were also characterized as being reliant on and committed to the Church's purpose. The church structure matched the Wesleyan reformatory teaching on justification. The Church was open to the public and free of charge. There were few requests for membership and service to the people of the land who came to the Church. Methodism was also perceived as being a part of a wider movement of God's work in the world, the Kingdom of God in the present. This characteristic connects to Wesleyan doctrine on evangelism, diaconal ministry, ethics, and the job of going forth to seek God's lost sheep (Thaarup, 2019).

Thus, such traits advocated a desirable praxis theology, action that may more effectively form a practical doctrinal bedrock (Maddox, 1995). Because Wesley depended mainly on pedagogy from early church patricians from the Early Church, and other Greek divines from early antiquity, as his precedents for theological engagement, he is regarded as a model of practical theology (Maddox, 1988). The entire created order, with their systems, according to John Wesley, were within the purview of God's vision "encompassing neighbors and adversaries (Outler, 1964)." Similarly, God is always working through multi varied ways and channels since he is not limited either by power, time or space. Furthermore, his wisdom guarantees that he cannot make a mistake. This signifies that God knows how to handle different cultures and traditions. Furthermore, he has the power to handle those cultures. God is certainly not one sided, like a knife. He is multi dimensional, without the limitations of finitude, always knowing where and when to touch his creation.

Wesley's desire for the Patristic period stemmed from his Anglican upbringing (Maddox, 1990). Anglicans in the seventeenth century thought they would best relate with other denominations if they understood the church as it was before Constantine paganized it. Accordingly, they viewed the early church as a model framework, from which they would derive templates for engagements (Maddox, 1995). One implication was that they began to use different theological forms to express themselves like sermons, and small articles of faith, encyclopediae, and Institutions. As a result, early Anglicanism faced less friction between academia and practice. Their faith did not remain up in the sky. They were not mere ideologues suffering from a dearth of practical character. Of course, there were bottlenecks, since each construct has some, and when Wesley confronted them, he realized that he couldn't stay in the relative safety (and seclusion) of academia (Maddox, 1995).

Therefore, principally, John Wesley began to view born again faithfuls as the core of theological work, emphasizing those who were frequently excluded from the established Church (Wilson & Harper, 1988). Their views, needs and well-being became the all consuming passion that drove him. Their care was paramount. In formulating his vision, Wesley saw two things. He at once clearly recognized the underlying views that inspire and govern his actions and the pastor-

al work requisite in the shaping of this worldview (Maddox, 1995).

He also exemplified participation in philanthropy. He encouraged the reading of doctrinal statements so people could understand their lineage and stock. He was particularly offended when he found Christians who were shallow and parochial. He wanted Christians whose roots reached below the top soil, to the deep layers where the humus and nutrients were. Consequently, he severely demanded that every Christian master the articles of faith and the catechical teachings. His endgame was for the Christians under his care to become healthy spiritually. To this end, he worked hard to make sure that aids to study the bible, new hymnals, and Christian books were available. He also did theological editing of the Book of Common Prayer (Maddox, 1995).

Wesley's theological activity resembled the traits required in a revived "practical" discipline of theology, and these theological activities included the following: Wesley's Theological Activities Were Harmonized. Wesley predated the rising separation of the sciences in theological education. As a result, he exhibited no reluctance in straying into subjects such as Scripture, Christian history, church discipline, and philosophical theology. While recognizing several forms of theological writing, such as contentious, pragmatic, and other forms of writing, Wesley maintained a general theological purpose. This was the case when he put theological thinking to use in serving God. He was simplistic in integrated biblical instruction since he was never confronted with the difficulty of subsequent disagreements. However, his example may still be relevant as postmodern theologians seek a simplicity that reconciles the diverse theological spheres (Maddox, 1995).

Further, his theology was comprehensive. He once said that correct opinion is just but a small slice of religion. He did not want to invalidate sound opinion but rather emphasize that it is meaningless unless it is embodied in Christian activity (Maddox, 1992). The connection between dogma and sacramental theology may also be seen in Wesley's bishops' symposiums, which included not just doctrine but also rigor and conduct (Wesley, 1744). Even though he bore his era's myopia to the building elements of sinfulness and Christian engagement, it's not unexpected that some scholars of liberation theology have found Wesley's example on this matter illuminating (Runyon, 1981). When it comes to the more significant notion of a wholesome scholarly study on dogma that embraces the principles of ethics of character, Wesley has so much merit that he has frequently been cited as an example by proponents of this general issue (Clapper, 2014).

The importance of praxis was reflected in his theological endeavours, as Heitzenrater (2013) argues. This leads to the assertion of action's centrality in the theological approach. Such primacy believes that actual theological effort is initiated by the demands and problems of existing actions. Even a cursory review reveals that the battle to fulfill the existential demands of his congregants and resolve the raging debates and tensions within his rebirth movement was the impetus for most of Wesley's theological musings. The importance of praxis also

implies that theological contemplation must constantly be linked to action via “first-order” theological activity. The above overview of his endeavors should signify his admiration for belief that ensues into action (Rowe, 1976). Prioritizing activity does not imply a callous realism or a disregard for thorough doctrinal study.

Wesley did not shy away from doctrinal reflection. Indeed, he addressed every primary subject of Christian teaching at some point. Furthermore, Wesley did not confine himself to concepts with apparent consequences for Christian practice (or evangelism). He felt compelled to engage in specific, somewhat technical discussions, such as whether the legal or qualifying cause of faith and righteousness was Christ’s death (Knight, 1992). However, his teaching is to be distinguished by its emphasis on its impact, and the consequences of the theory under examination theologically and anthropologically, regardless of how technical or speculative it might be (Maddox, 1992). As a result, saying that Wesley was more of a practical thinker than a philosophical one is deceptive. More suitable would be to regard Wesley as a self-aware, pragmatic, action oriented theologian engaged in serious dogmatic study in response to practice and service to fundamental theological activity (Maddox, 1995).

Wesley’s theology was designed to be transformative. Another attribute required in praxis is to seek to rectify Christian behavior rather than simply understanding or explicating it (Maddox, 1995). This implies that persons and civilizations are not spiritually whole, and that theology’s goal is to change them, not to make them content with their flaws. Wesley concurred with them, as indicated by his take down and ridicule of John Calvin’s proteges, that all they wanted was to produce Calvinists, while he, on the other hand, only ever wanted to make Christians (Telford, 1931). As previously said, he centered his theological activities on genres most likely to have persona-forming and character changing influence.

Practical theology is thought to be a collaborative activity. As a result, the question of whether Wesley’s theological effort was communal arises. In this light, Wesley’s precedent must be seen as equivocal. On the one hand, he bravely attempted to close the gap between his uneducated supporters and academic theism by giving condensed and simplified copies of literature he deemed fit. Similarly, Wesley established the conference as a community space for addressing Methodist theology. Despite his repeated statements to the contrary, he prefers to explore ideas rather than indoctrinate, he was not a great supporter of allowing the *holloi polloi* have a say in religious matters.

Wesley’s primary purpose was to give adequate theological instruction to his laity and untrained ministers and other apprentices rather than request fresh theological insights or viewpoints (Jackson, 1872). Evidently, looking back with the benefit of hindsight, we can pillory Wesley for denigrating the views of the laity, but that’s only because we are products of our age, which places a strong accent on individualism. Wesley partly aimed at making the community responsible for theological authenticity requirements, which he accomplished by occa-

sionally calling for a vote on major issues (Maddox, 1995).

Context determined what he did, and where he did it (Baker, 1984). There is an increasing appreciation of Wesley historians of how situational his theological reasoning was, and how this knowledge helps to explain some of his perceived theological discrepancies. Although this is a different degree of contextualization than relating the Gospel to specific situations, the basic structure remains the same. The critical thing about the environmental mechanics of Wesley's religious study is that it rarely devolves into relativistic tendencies. Instead, there appears to be a considerable coherence throughout the many ambient variances that seem to represent a core orienting concern that motivated him (Maddox, 1994).

Doctrinal work of John Wesley is sporadic. It is assumed that practical theology should be occasional in character. Perhaps the most noteworthy instances of Wesley's theological effort in this regard are the cladding correspondence, appeals, pamphlets, and essays produced to elucidate and uphold his fundamental convictions. One would think that these are outliers to Wesley's label as a dogmatist in action. Indeed, these writings are what his apologists typically resort to safeguard him as a theologian in academia. These publications, however, best show his day to day thinking, inspired by his Methodist people's disputes and needs (Maddox, 1995).

7. Conclusion

Therefore, creating inclusivity in the ministry of local churches is essential in the praxis of Wesleyan theology. In today's increasingly multicultural culture, Wesleyan-oriented churches are focused on creating reborn humankind, with differences but unified in Jesus. Ecclesia is a public summons to be God's people, a unique and multilingual polity constructed and gathered as tangible politics in and for the world (Sheffield, 2014). This, according to Wesley, is indeed the best demonstration of the efficacy of the good news.

Wesley believed that the most potent arguments for the Christian faith are Christian living and fellowship, according to *A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity*. Not a collection of principles, but the way a community lives, united together with Jesus at the apex. Wesley's vision of redemption as a restorative, reconciliation act streamlines Christian consciousness and leads to change via encounters with God. Christians are commanded to love both God and their neighbor (Bonino, 1985). Making themselves vulnerable in front of the Supreme Being also causes others to respond to him in the same area, regardless of personal traits.

Christians' connection with church newcomers, some of whom suffer on the fringes of society, is informed by the Wesleyan and Methodist faith that contact with the underprivileged is a charitable act that serves as a conduit for mercy and grace for both the donor and the receiver. The critical nexus between doctrinal conceptions and Christian communal engagement is made by the Wes-

Wesleyan concept of what is necessary to shape discipleship expansion. The Wesleyan interaction between small group communities of newborn believers, with the Lord Jesus as Savior, friend and mediator in their midst, is the enduring legacy of Wesleyanism to the Christian church (Sheffield, 2014).

8. Recommendations

Therefore, this article recommends that if Christians hinged on the Wesleyan heritage are serious about reviving the Wesleyan framework of praxis oriented Christianity, they need to consider taking this tradition more sincerely themselves. Churches must absorb themselves in the lives of their fellow believers, particularly those who are frequently left out of the picture as entirely as they do in academia (Maddox, 1995). Christians must dedicate more attention to the primary level of theological labor, which includes activities that most immediately shape and change the realm of Christianity: establishing rituals, structuring adoration, expounding the faith, and developing instructional ceremonies (Jennings, 1982).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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