
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF WESLEYAN MISSIOLOGY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

Christi-An C. Bennett

The temptation for many in missions is to focus on methods, strategies and outcomes. But a missiology which is not grounded on a solid theological foundation is a shaky missiology indeed. The majority of evangelical missiological studies being published today tend to come from Calvinists and, increasingly, from Pentecostal perspectives. These perspectives are valuable, but before considering them, Wesleyan missiologists need to be sure of our own theological footing. This paper hopes to contribute to that primary work of theological foundation-building by going back to the beginning of Wesleyan world missionary efforts and asking, “What theological foundations defined the missionary identity of early nineteenth century Wesleyans?”

British Wesleyan Methodism had official missionary representatives serving overseas as early as 1769 when it was still a young movement, but unlike the Baptists and Congregationalist, Methodism did not establish a general missionary society until 1818. Meanwhile in the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, a slow process unfolded in which Methodism worked out the details of its own missionary identity based on its own history and theology. This paper considers the theological

¹Adapted from a section of Christi-An C. Bennett, “The Development of the Idea of Mission in British Wesleyan Thought 1784-1914,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manchester, 1995.

backdrop on which the scene unfolds, focusing on those doctrines which became most important in Wesleyan missionary thought.

Foundations in Distinctive Wesleyan Doctrines

In trying to win his fellow Baptists to the world missionary cause in the late eighteenth century, William Carey (1761-1834, now known as the “Father of the Modern Missionary Movement”) had to overcome the theological problems presented by a radical Calvinism. The strong Calvinist conception of the sovereignty of God and its accompanying doctrines of predestination and limited atonement made evangelistic activism something of a problem among Carey’s fellow Particular Baptists. Such problems were overcome in the more moderate Calvinism of Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) that came to dominate in the nineteenth century. Andrew Fuller, under whose ministry Carey was baptized and who became the leading promoter of the Baptist Missionary Society, introduced to Baptist theology a larger view of the redemptive purposes of God and of the Church’s responsibilities in missions.²

Wesleyan Arminianism, however, did not have Calvinist theological limitations to overcome. In Wesley’s theology the atonement was viewed as unlimited and redemption as universal. The ground of Wesleyan universality was in the “whosoever” of the gospel. Wesleyan doctrine proclaimed a free salvation to whomever would believe, without the limits imposed by the doctrine of predestination. This made Wesleyanism uniquely adapted to world missionary thinking. G. G. Findlay explained the missionary implications of this distinctive approach in the first volume of his *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, “The man who received God’s mercy . . . must first acknowledge the rights of his fellows to its benefits before he could

²William Henry Brackney, *The Baptists* (London: Greenwood, 1888), 40, 168-9. Fuller’s views are explained in his book *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (1781).

realize his own; his personal interest in the redemption of Christ was a deduction from the universal interest of mankind therein.”³

He went on to ask,

How could one so believing, with rational consistency or with common gratitude, be indifferent to Foreign Missions? To assume such an attitude, to repudiate his Negro or Hindu neighbour as a fellow-claimant on the estate secured for mankind in Christ, and to refuse the help by which that claim might be made good, would be to renounce the very ground on which his own assurance of salvation rests.⁴

As Findlay indicated, this doctrine of universal redemption was easily linked to “foreign” missionary obligation when “foreign” missions began to take hold in Wesleyan circles.

In the first gathering of a district Methodist Missionary Society in 1813 layman William Scarth revealed the Wesleyan consciousness of the missionary implications of the doctrine of universal redemption. He asserted, “I conceive, Sir, our call, as Methodists, to Missionary exertions is peculiarly clear. For we fully believe that ‘the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him, for whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”⁵ This theme of universal redemption was a common one in those early Wesleyan district missionary meetings. William Dawson, also addressing the 1813 Leeds gathering, declared, “We believe that, wherever the Gospel is faithfully preached, this salvation is within the reach of all.”⁶ Barnabas Shaw, preaching a missionary sermon in 1815, proclaimed, “The gospel of Jesus Christ is

³G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, I (London: The Epworth Press, 1921), 31.

⁴Findlay and Holdsworth, I:31.

⁵W. G. Scarth in *A Report of the Principal Speeches Delivered at the Formation of the Methodist Missionary Society for the Leeds District* (London, 1813), 22.

⁶William Dawson in *Leeds Speeches* (1813), 32.

. . . *the power of God to salvation, to every one that believeth.*”⁷ An address by the committee of the Halifax District Methodist Missionary Society in 1814 referred specifically to the advantage to a Methodist missionary in not being tied to the doctrine of predestination, but being freed instead by a doctrine of universality to preach to all.⁸

It is true that by the early nineteenth century a moderating doctrine had prevailed in the evangelical Calvinist camp which could hold a strong doctrine of sovereignty together with a firm belief in evangelistic responsibility. This removed for the Calvinists the doctrinal obstacles to mission and narrowed the theological gap between them and the Wesleyan evangelicals. It must be noted still that the Wesleyans entered world missions in no small part because of their self-consciousness of their own doctrinal distinctive of universal redemption. If the question “Why ‘foreign’ missions?” was posed to the early Wesleyan world missions proponent, the answer most commonly would have rested on the “whosoever of the gospel.”

Next to universal redemption, the other primary doctrinal distinctive of Wesleyanism was the doctrine of entire sanctification, also referred to as the doctrine of Christian perfection and the doctrine of perfect love. This doctrine, too, became foundational to the entrance of Wesleyan Methodism into foreign missions. The doctrine of entire sanctification, in brief, states that there is a second work of grace in a Christian’s life, entered into after initial regeneration through the door of full consecration, and issuing in a heart freed from original sin and perfect in love to God and humans. In the Wesleyan formulation this “perfect love” was an active love, and one of the primary actions which it issued was going out to help others into the experience of regeneration. Findlay pointed out that the consecration element of entire

⁷Barnabas Shaw, *A Missionary Sermon, Preached at Flambro* (Hull, 1815), 16-17.

⁸“Address to the Public, By the General Committee of the Methodist Missionary Society for the Halifax District,” *Methodist Magazine* XXXVII (1814): 231.

sanctification meant consecration to Christ's mission in the world.⁹ The fruit of entire sanctification—perfect love—meant a sanctified Christian could not stand passively by as other souls languished outside of Christ. Instead that Christian was compelled to go out and actively work to win those souls to Christ. The doctrine of universal redemption told the Wesleyans that Christ died for literally all humans. The doctrine of perfect love compelled Wesleyans to go out and apply that remedy in Christ's name. Findlay wrote, “the passion for holiness . . . was the prelude to the outburst of missionary enthusiasm.”¹⁰

Working from this doctrinal background, Christian love early became one of the primary missionary motives stressed by Wesleyan “foreign” mission advocates. Samuel Taylor, writing for the *Methodist Magazine* in 1814, cited primary among the motives for “foreign” mission, the love of Christ in the heart.¹¹ Barnabas Shaw preached similarly of following Christ's example of “universal good-will to the fallen race.”¹² The *Annual Report* of the Wesleyan missions of 1815 also appealed to love as the motive for mission:

GENUINE religion is comprised in two particulars; namely, love to God, and love to man. He who has the first, cheerfully performs every duty of piety which he owes to God; and, he who has the second, neglects no duty which he owes to his neighbour. But, some may enquire, who is our neighbour? We reply, every man on earth who stands in need of our help, either in temporal things, or those which relate to eternity; . . .¹³

⁹Findlay and Holdsworth, I:33.

¹⁰Findlay and Holdsworth, I:33.

¹¹Samuel Taylor, “An Apology for recurring to Extraordinary Exertions in behalf of the Methodist Missions,” *Methodist Magazine* XXXVII (1814): 704.

¹²Barnabas Shaw, *A Missionary Sermon* (1815), p. 24.

¹³*The Annual Report of the State of Missions, Foreign and Domestic, conducted by the Conference, and supported by the members and friends of the United Societies late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley, Deceased* (1815), 3.

Adam Clarke preached that by supporting foreign missions Methodists would “give proof of” their “obedience to the command of Christ, ye shall love your neighbor as yourselves.”¹⁴ A Halifax district missionary address connected this missionary spirit of love to the revival experienced in the Evangelical Awakening, “With the reviving spirit of religion, compassion for the heathen, long neglected by Protestants revived also.”¹⁵ The missionary spirit of love, was thus seen by these early Wesleyans as directly connected to their own religious experience.

In terms of distinctively Methodist doctrines, universal redemption and entire sanctification formed the primary foundation for a Methodist missionary thrust. However, there were other doctrines which Methodism held in common with the rest of British evangelicalism which were equally influential as missionary foundations. These were the doctrines of divine providence and biblical authority and the evangelical understanding of the exclusive claims of Christianity.

Foundations in Common Evangelical Doctrines

The Calvinistic focus on the sovereignty of God left no room for free human choice in the matter of salvation whereas the Wesleyan focus on the moral nature of humanity and the universality of God’s grace did make room for this human free will. This did not, however, mean that Wesleyan thought lost sight of the sovereignty of God. On the contrary, Wesleyans shared with other evangelicals a clear sense of the sovereign workings of God to control and direct human history to accomplish his divine ends. This was maintained in the doctrine of divine providence.

¹⁴Adam Clarke, “A Short Account of the Introduction of the Gospel into the British Isles; and the obligation of Britons to make known its salvation to every region of the earth,” (Address made 1 December 1814 at City Road Chapel, London), *The Miscellaneous Works of Adam Clarke, LL.D, F.A.S.*, XIII: *Christian Missions*, James Everett, ed., (London, 1837).

¹⁵“Address to the Public, By the General Committee of the Methodist Missionary Society for the Halifax District,” *Methodist Magazine* XXXVII (1814): 229.

Wesleyans watched for signs of the working of providence on a general level in the molding of history to God's ultimate purposes. On a more particular level they watched for the workings of providence in the direction of the course of their own nation and church. Events of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were, for the Wesleyans, particularly full of signs of the activities of providence.

The French Revolution and succeeding rise and fall of Napoleon especially attracted the attention of Wesleyan interpreters of providence. They saw in the Revolution the judgment of God on the Roman Catholic Church. In an appendix to his commentary on the Bible in 1807, Thomas Coke wrote,

The iniquities of this apostate church have been made instrumental in procuring the judgments which have been inflicted on her, becoming, in the same moment, her progeny and scourge, and displaying to all future generations of mankind, that God, by his providence, superintends the affairs of the world.¹⁶

Wesley, too, saw in events in Europe signs of providence at work. He wrote to William Black, for instance, in 1790,

O stir up the gift of God that is in you, and wrestle with God in mighty prayer. He is doing great things in many parts of Europe such as have not been seen for many generations; and the children of God expect to see greater things than these. I do not know that England was ever before in so quiet a state and it is our part to wait the openings of Divine Providence, and follow the leadings of it.¹⁷

¹⁶Thomas Coke, *The Recent Occurrences of Europe Considered in Relation to Such Prophecies as Are Either Fulfilling or Unfulfilled* (London, 1809), 189 (first published in 1807 in an appendix to Coke's commentary on the Bible).

¹⁷Letter to William Black (Nova Scotia), March 1790, in *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M. sometime fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford*, VIII, John Telford, ed., Standard Edition, 204. See also letter to Thomas Morrell on pp. 199-200 of the same volume.

When the British conflict with France came to an end in 1814 John Stuart spoke at a missionary meeting of the providential “prospect of a general and lasting peace,” and the “pre-eminence to which Britain has arisen among the nations.”¹⁸ Richard Watson, too, spoke of the providential indications of peace with France, “as it will increase our means of promoting the kingdom of Christ in the world, . . .”¹⁹

Wesleyan thinkers increasingly in this period discerned the hand of providence pointing the way to mission. This was seen in the 1813 British legislation to allow missionaries into British India²⁰ and in the place of power Britain, especially, but also other Christian nations, had attained in the world. Watson preached, “Such have been the arrangements of divine Providence, . . . —that it is worthy of note, that great political power is found nowhere in the world, but among Christian nations.”²¹ An 1818 WMMS pamphlet referred to the “nearly TWO HUNDRED Millions of subjects,” providentially placed under British rule for God’s purposes, particularly the purpose of evangelization.²² Adam Clarke preached,

It is true, that God must open the door of faith to the heathen; and we should wait till we hear a voice, as in a certain case, saying “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” But is not this door opened in different dark parts of Europe, in Africa, in America, and the almost innumerable islands of the globe? And also in

¹⁸John Stuart in *Resolutions at the Formation of the Methodist Missionary Society, of the Dublin District . . . with abstracts of the speeches . . .* (Dublin, 1814), 32.

¹⁹Richard Watson, “Sermon II,” *The Works of the Rev. Richard Watson*, II, second edition (London, 1834), 32-33.

²⁰See John Stuart in Dublin resolutions, 32.

²¹Watson, “Sermon CI,” *Works*, IV (1835), 247-248.

²²*Hints to those who ask, Why Should I Contribute to Support Missions to the Heathen?* (London, c. 1818), 1.

Asia, where either Paganism of the worst species, or oppressive and degrading Mohammedanism, governs more than one fourth of the globe with an absolute and destructive sway?²³

“Providence” was a word ever on Wesleyan lips as they discussed world events. As the world increasingly yielded to British influence, Wesleyans increasingly saw world mission as the direction in which “providence” was pointing, thus it became a foundational doctrine in Wesleyan missionary thought.

Another doctrine that became influential in Wesleyan missionary thought was that of the exclusive claims of Christianity. This doctrine was linked to the universality discussed earlier. Not only did Wesleyans believe Christ’s redemption was for all humanity, they also believed that the Christian religion was the true religion and that the “Christian God” was the only true God, a God who made exclusive claims on all humanity. Those who had not personally yielded to the reign of Christ nor accepted the benefits of his atonement, then, lived under the wrath rather than the salvation of God. Non-Christian religions were viewed very dimly as filled with error and perversions of the truth. Watson asserted, “In all false systems of religion, we see the original revelations converted into the means of darkening the understanding, and polluting the heart.”²⁴ Claudius Buchanan’s writings which described such Eastern customs as idolatry, *sati*, and infanticide, reinforced for Wesleyans the belief that “paganism” produced only ignorance, superstition, misery and deplorable immorality.²⁵

²³“A Short Account,” *Miscellaneous Works*, XIII: 31.

²⁴Watson, “Sermon LXXXVII,” *Works*, IV: 67.

²⁵See, for example, Humphrey Sandwith, *A Report of a Speech Delivered on the 13th of January, 1814, At a public meeting held in the Methodist Chapel, Beverley, for the purpose of forming an auxiliary Missionary Society*, (Beverley, 1814), 4-9; Barnabas Shaw, *A Missionary Sermon* (1815), 8-9. Buchanan (1766-1815) was a chaplain under the East India Company in India (1797-1809) who served as vice provost of the College of Fort William in Calcutta. His writings included *Christian Researches in Asia* which described Hindu worship and customs and the Thomist Christian

These early nineteenth century Wesleyans firmly believed that there was no “safety” in judgment for the “pagans” who had not heard of Christ. Romans 1:18-32 was the text frequently quoted in this regard, suggesting that the “pagans” were morally responsible, for, though not the Gospel of Christ, they had received some kind of spiritual light and yet rejected it.²⁶ Those non-believers who died without hearing the gospel, Wesleyans believed, were in the same danger of eternal punishment as those who had consciously rejected the gospel.²⁷ Watson queried, “are the heathens, immoral and idolatrous as they are, *actually safe?*” His answer accused believers of being “lulled by the drone of that dotting and toothless theology which . . . employs itself rather in drawing extravagant pictures of the mercy of God, than in supporting the just rights of his government.”²⁸ This belief in the wrath the “heathen” were under coupled with the knowledge from increasing reports of the moral depravity of “pagans” to stir in Wesleyans a heightened world missionary conscience.

Finally, Wesleyan missionary thought was influenced by the profound Wesleyan confidence in the power of the gospel preached from the Bible. From the early days of the British and Foreign Bible Society, the *Methodist Magazine* printed supportive accounts of its work. Early Methodist missionaries were sent out with the instructions, “Let the Bible be YOUR BOOK; and let all other books be read only in order to obtain a better acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures, and a greater facility in explaining, illustrating, and applying their important

community in India, and *Memoir of the Expediency of an Ecclesiastical Establishment for India both as the Means of Perpetuating the Christian Religion among our own Countrymen and as a Foundation for the Ultimate Civilization of the Natives* which was influential in Parliament’s decision to establish an Anglican bishopric in India.

²⁶See, for example, Shaw, *A Missionary Sermon*, 11-12.

²⁷See, for example, *The Annual Report of the Missions* (1809), 25; Richard Watson, *A Sermon preached at Albion-Street Chapel, Leeds, at the formation of the Methodist Missionary Society for the Leeds District, October 6th, 1813, . . .* (Liverpool, 1813), 7.

²⁸Watson, *A Sermon at Leeds*, (1813), 6.

contents.”²⁹ The Bible, as the written source of the gospel, was seen to be an integral element of missionary work. The other integral element was the missionary who preached and applied the Scripture to the people’s hearts. William Dawson asserted, “We believe that, wherever the Gospel is faithfully preached, this salvation is within the reach of *all*.”³⁰ Wesleyans believed that it was the *preaching* of the gospel which brought salvation within reach of unbelievers. Watson preached, “the ministry of the word is the grand means appointed by God for the salvation of the world.”³¹ He further explained the Methodist grounds for confidence in gospel preaching: “Wherever the gospel is preached it is accompanied by a dispensation of the spirit,” which enables the hearers “to understand and obey it.”³² Wesleyans saw this preaching of the word to be *THE* way, God’s way, to bring the world to salvation, and a way that was guaranteed to meet the needs of a lost humanity. They had no confidence in secular education or civilization efforts, but they had utter confidence in the efforts of gospel preaching.³³

Doctrinally, this confidence was grounded in the Protestant doctrine of Holy Scripture.

Experientially, this confidence was grounded in the great success of gospel preaching in Britain during the Evangelical Awakening. Referring to the Evangelical Awakening, the Halifax Methodist Missionary Society Committee wrote,

The springs of that powerful engine, which the first instruments of this great work directed against the ignorance and the vices of mankind, are, perhaps, but *now* only acquiring their full play; and

²⁹*Address From the Committee for the Management of the Methodist Missions, to Messrs. Shaw, Broadbent, Carver, Callaway, and Jackson, Missionaries about to sail to South Africa, and to the Island of Ceylon* (London, 1816), 5.

³⁰William Dawson in *Leeds Speeches* (1813), 32.

³¹Watson in *A Sermon at Leeds* (1813), 11.

³²Watson, 16.

³³See, for example, Watson, 11-13.

the system begins to move with accelerated energy and more diffused effect.³⁴

An 1816 address by the General Committee of the Newcastle District Methodist Missionary Society asserted,

Your societies, your chapels, your privileges and enjoyments, are all the results of that *home mission* which God has crowned with so great a blessing; and in the full enjoyment of these riches of grace, we know you feel for the emptiness and wants of others. The Christian world moves at this moment in one grand concert, to extend the dominion of the Son of God. . . .³⁵

This Wesleyan confidence, grounded in the Protestant doctrine of Holy Scriptures and the experience of the Great Awakening, helped to lay a foundation for Wesleyan world mission expansion.

These doctrines, the Wesleyan distinctives of universal redemption and Christian perfection and the common evangelical doctrines of providence, the exclusive claims of Christianity, and the God-appointed power of the preached Word, all worked together to form a solid theological foundation for Methodism's expanding missionary vision in the early nineteenth century.

The world now at the beginning of the second millennium is much changed from the world of those pioneering Wesleyan missiologists, but those foundational doctrines maintain a timeless claim on our attention. How do they or should they apply in today's world? How do they or should they shape and challenge our identity as Wesleyan Christians in a world where billions still remain outside the gospel? Are there other distinctively Wesleyan or common evangelical doctrines that should be added to the theological foundations of Wesleyan missiology? These questions suggest a beginning point for the work of Wesleyan missiologists today.

³⁴“Address By the General Committee for Halifax,” *Methodist Magazine* XXVII (1814): 228.

³⁵*Methodist Missions. Address to the Public by the General Committee of the Methodist Missionary Society for the Newcastle District* (c. 1816), 3.