

**WESLEYAN AND EVANGELICAL:  
MY SCHOLARSHIP IN RELATION TO THE MISSION  
OF SAINT PAUL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY**

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My research and writing has been focused on three overlapping concerns: (1) to study the theology and practice of John Wesley and early Methodism; (2) to examine the theological linkages and practices of Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions; and (3) to develop a “post-conservative” evangelical theology.

**1. To Study the Theology and Practice of John Wesley and Early Methodism**

Early in my ministry I became strongly convinced that John Wesley was not simply a significant historical figure, but still has much to teach us. It was as a pastor that I first began to read him extensively and develop a passion for expounding his theology and practice. He is, I believe, a key to the **renewal of the church** today. Wesley’s movement was designed specifically to **renew his own denomination**, the Church of England, through moving persons from either no belief or nominal Christianity to becoming highly motivated, spiritually growing **disciples of Jesus Christ**. In my work I have highlighted three aspects of Wesley’s approach that can aid us in contemporary **renewal of the church** today.

First, Wesley’s theology is holistic. He has a both/and rather than either/or way of thinking. For example, Wesley sees the intrinsic unity of evangelism *and* social concern, conversion *and* formation, reason *and* experience, written liturgy *and* spontaneity, tradition *and* contextualization. But he doesn’t simply join things together that others consider to be opposites, he transcends these false dichotomies by reframing the issues.

Second, Wesley is clear on the content and goal of salvation, which is to restore us to the image of God in which we were created. The heart of that image is love for God and neighbor. Third, he is equally clear that salvation is by grace, and grace enables and invites our participation in an ongoing relationship with God through means of grace. These include works of piety such as prayer, scripture, the Lord’s Supper, Christian conversation, as well as works of mercy involving care for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the neighbor. Faithfulness to these means of grace and the relationship with God and neighbor they enable was through participation in small groups and adherence to a spiritual discipline. Wesley was convinced that only **renewed people in a renewed church** would have the desire to reach out to **transform the world**, and it was the credibility of the gospel in their own lives that would make it appealing to others.

This concentration on Wesley, and especially on the means of grace, has been the most important element in my writing and teaching. It is the focus of *The Presence of God in the Christian life*, *Eight Life-Enriching Practices of United Methodists*, *The Conversation Matters*, *Transforming Evangelism*, and most of my articles and chapters in

edited books. Preparing leaders to engage in making disciples and renewing the church through Wesleyan theology and practice is the central focus in two-thirds of my classes, as well as the D. Min. track in Wesleyan Spirituality, Leadership and Congregational Renewal, and my teaching in the Course of Study School.

## **2. Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal Traditions**

The second central concern of my research writing is the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions, including early American and African-American Methodism. These movements constitute an interconnected theological family with their roots in Wesleyanism. At their inception they were vital movements, highly evangelistic, counter-cultural, and sometimes offering a radical vision for social change. They also had a pervasive experience of and confidence in the presence and power of God.

I am especially interested in what made these movements so vital, why so many seemed to lose that initial vitality, and how it might be recovered. Every one of these movements produced large numbers of **disciples of Jesus Christ**, and had as their goal the **renewal of the church and/or the transformation of the world**. We have much to learn from their stories.

Indeed, it was the stories that first grasped my attention. I initially read about early holiness proponents in America who held together a vibrant personal piety with a transformative social vision. I then found a similar pattern of concern for the poor, interracial meetings and ministries, and women preachers and leaders among early Pentecostals, and even among early American Methodists. They were all either working to **transform the world** or they were witnessing to a transformed society in their life and worship together, that is, being a **renewed church**.

The Wesleyan/Pentecostal Consultation which has been meeting annually under my leadership has been a key arena to think through these issues. We are hoping to publish *From Aldersgate to Azusa Street*, which I am editing. In addition, I have written articles on these issues, and several of my courses draw upon this work.

## **3. Develop a “Post-conservative” Evangelical Theology.**

The final concern of my research and writing is to develop a “post-conservative” evangelical theology. I’m not particularly happy with the term “post-conservative,” as I still see myself as theologically conservative. The term has come into widespread use, however, as describing a certain movement within evangelical theology. Those who coined the term use it not to mean an abandonment of orthodoxy but to designate those contemporary evangelical theologies that take seriously “post-modern” insights in philosophy and trends in culture. This means among other things theologies that are more relational than individualistic, that take account of our limited perspectives due to our cultural locations while at the same time denying that truth is relative, and that emphasize the role of biblical narrative and a faithful community. They remain committed to historic orthodoxy concerning the Trinity, the person and work of Christ and biblical authority.

My first book in this area, *A Future for Truth*, focused on how we can have confidence in the gospel in today's world, with an emphasis on grounding theology in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the nature and interpretation of scripture and the work of God in the world. It concludes with a vision of a **renewed church participating in the transforming mission of God**. This was an especially satisfying book to write, as it allowed me to put some of my deepest theological commitments on paper, and share them with others. I am now working on *A Future for Love*, which will focus on conversion to and growing in the Christian life, and how to be **faithful disciples of Jesus Christ** in the world today. This book will draw upon Wesleyan insights as well as those of contemporary evangelical theologians. I have also written articles in this area and the fruit of this research informs several of my courses, and is the focus of two.

My scholarship, like my teaching, is an aspect of my calling to ministry. From the first it has had as its goal enabling persons to work for the **renewal of the church** and the **transformation of the world** through practices that lead to growth as **disciples of Jesus Christ**. It is, I hope, a contemporary version of the "practical divinity" that marked John Wesley's theology and practice, and I pray will mark the church today as well.