



# SEVEN KEYS

TO CATECHESIS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**DR. TIMOTHY C. TENNENT**

A SEEDBED SHORT

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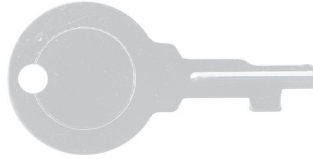
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## **THE DISCIPLESHIP GENIUS OF THE WESLEYAN MOVEMENT**

Christians are commanded to “make culture” by reconstructing the grand narrative of the gospel. This grand story echoes from creation to fall, from covenant to incarnation, from resurrection to ascension, from Pentecost to church, from the return of Christ to New Creation. This big narrative of God’s mighty, redemptive acts loses its coherence when we only tell bits and pieces of the story. Often the surrounding, post-Christian culture forgets the grand story completely. Yet, the greatest tragedy is that the Church itself has so fragmented and domesticated the grand story that we are called to rebuild the broken walls almost from scratch. As Wesleyans, we must focus on the distinctives of our tradition as we seek to restore the fragmented gospel story.



## DISCERN THE PRIOR WORKING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The first rebuilding step is catechesis, or oral biblical instruction in the church and home, sometimes called altar and hearth catechesis. Although traditionally catechesis relates to the Catholic tradition, all Christian faiths are commanded to verbally share and teach others the gospel story. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7 Moses gives a command from the Lord, saying:

“Write these commandments that I’ve given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates.” (MSG)

Often when Christians begin to think about catechesis they begin by brainstorming what Christians should “do” or “know.” The “do” list includes such spiritual disciplines as prayer and scripture reading. The “know” list likely includes key doctrines such as the two natures of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity or the Ten Commandments. **However, the Wesleyan catechesis does not begin with knowledge, but with the person of Christ. Catechesis begins with the prior act of God in prevenient grace.** Wesley believed all spiritual formation began with God’s action on behalf of the sinner, bridging the gap between human depravity and free will. Prevenient grace lifts the human race out of its debauchery and grants us the capacity to respond further to God’s grace. Jesus declares that “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). This verse clearly refers to a longing rooted in the Triune God that precedes our justification. God’s

prevenient grace is His act of unmerited favor. God's grace "enlightens everyone" (John 1:9) and lifts us up, allowing us to exercise our will and respond to the gift of Christ. Thomas Oden aptly says that "the divine will always 'goes before' or 'prevenes' (leads the way) for the human will, so that the human will may choose freely in accord with the divine will."<sup>1</sup>

Often, Wesleyans are wrongly accused of denying human depravity because of our emphasis on free will. However, Wesleyans believe in total depravity every bit as much as any five point Calvinist. Wesleyans and other denominations differ because Wesleyans believe that if the doctrine of human depravity is not linked to God's action in prevenient grace, then serious theological difficulties arise. Wesleyan thought affirms that God has taken the initiative to create a universal capacity for the human race to receive His grace. Many, of course, still resist His will and persist in rebellion against God. Love wins, yes, but justice also wins. Wesleyan thought is actually a middle position between a Pelagian view (which makes every person an Adam and admits no sin nature or bondage due to Adam's nature) and the Reformed view (which affirms limited atonement). **By free will Wesleyans actually mean "freed will," a will in bondage liberated by a free act of God's grace.** God's grace, of course, is not free in every possible respect since we are all influenced in many ways by the effects of the Fall. However, as a result of God's grace we now have a restored capacity that enables our hearts, minds and wills to respond to God's gift.



## **LEARN TO WAIT "IN" THE MEANS OF GRACE**

For Wesley, this "grace" conversation requires echoing the complete gospel story and reverberating it throughout all time, to all people. At this point, Wesley adds the *means of grace* to the concept of prevenient grace. Wesley

defines the “means of grace” as “*outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.*”<sup>2</sup> Wesley also identified three primary “means of grace” God has given to us: prayer (private or public), Scripture (reading or listening), and the Lord’s Supper. Quite a wide array of Christian groups accept the general idea that prayer, Scripture and the Lord’s Supper are “means of grace.” These actions are widely understood as the general means by which Christians grow stronger in their faith and grow in the grace of Christ. In other words, these means are God’s instruments to sanctify us. However, Wesley supported a much broader understanding of the means of grace; he saw these means of grace as a channel to convey not just sanctifying grace, but also preventing (prevenient) and justifying grace. In other words, Wesley understood that prayer, Scripture reading and even the Lord’s Supper could be used by God to convert someone to the faith. **Wesley understood this because the “means of grace” have no power to save anyone. Rather, these actions possess power to convey all forms of grace precisely because Christ himself is present in prayer, in the reading of Scripture and in the Lord’s Supper.** So, for Wesley, people don’t read Scripture, pray or take the Lord’s supper in solitude, but in the presence of the risen Christ, the only true “means of grace.” Therefore, we should exercise our freed wills and avail ourselves of the full range of the “means of grace.” Wesley encouraged people to wait in the means of grace, not *outside* them. He writes, “All who desire the grace of God are to wait for it *in the means* which he hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside.”<sup>3</sup>

We learn through this that catechesis for Wesley was fundamentally relational and was designed to draw us nearer to Christ. In Wesley’s journal we read about a time in his life when he felt a complete lack of faith. He journaled his feelings on March 4, 1738. Remember, Wesley’s heartwarming experience at Aldersgate did not occur until May 24, 1738). Wesley decided to quit preaching because, he reasons, “How can you preach to others when you have no faith yourself.” Wesley asked his good friend Peter Böhler for advice



about his preaching career. Böhler famously replied, “Preach faith till you have it; and then because you have it, you will preach faith.” Böhler’s reply accurately captures the Wesleyan belief of waiting for God in the means of Grace, not outside the means of grace. So, brothers and sisters, however you “feel,” keep reading, keep listening, keep praying and keep coming to the Lord’s Table.



## **CULTIVATE INTENTIONED COMMUNITY AROUND SHARED PRACTICE**

John Wesley founded the idea of “echoing” the Christian faith throughout the worldwide community. So far, we have explored the role of preventient grace and waiting “in the means of grace,” both important building blocks to a fully Wesleyan understanding of catechesis. The third genius of Wesley was his profound appreciation for the importance of small discipleship groups in community. The default idea in the mind of many people suggests that the best spiritual formation occurs when we are “in retreat.” Wesley challenged this notion on several fronts.

Eighteenth century Oxford was filled with spiritual apathy, deism, practical atheism and low-Christology Arianism. In short, Oxford was quite a bit like North America and Europe today. John and Charles Wesley gathered a few students together to “observe the method of study prescribed by the statutes of the university.” The statutes (long ignored) required that students engage in the “frequent and careful reading of the Scripture.” The Wesley brothers decided to promote engagement with the Scripture by forming a small group for studying the Greek. Its members were nicknamed, “Methodist.” The very origin of the word “Methodist” is rooted in a small group approach to catechesis, or the structured sharing of the gospel .

Catechesis is not merely learning the correct answers to doctrinal questions or saying “yes” to a particular Christian formula for salvation. For Wesley, catechesis involved learning to echo the entire rhythms of the Christian life. To put it bluntly, Wesley’s Christianity wasn’t just about *becoming* a Christian; it was about *being* a Christian. Wesley learned this from the Patristic mystagogy model (this was the instruction after baptism, between Easter and Pentecost which brought you into the mystery of the Church), but he united the idea with the community model of the early Celtic Christians. Later Wesley developed the entire “class system” that put all believers into small discipleship bands. The leader reported to the pastor on the spiritual state of those under his or her care (Yes, there were all female groups with female leaders, all male groups and mixed groups). They met weekly and maintained accountability, sustaining each other in prayer, song and transparent confession. Sinning members received discipline, and all were instructed in some aspect of the Apostolic faith. Everyone participated in the hour long meeting, an excellent model still followed today.



## **SEEK FORMATION THROUGH ACTIVE MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT**

Christianity did not always have a community concept. Most readers understand that the Christian monastic tradition is very diverse and multi-faceted. The earliest monastic traditions idealized desert hermits such as St. Antony (251-356), who is often cited as the founder of monasticism. They were the forerunners of the great contemplative stream. Our minds run quickly to the great masters of this tradition, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, the Rhineland mystics (St. Hildegarde or Meister Ecihart), Julian

of Norwich, St. Teresa of Avila or Thomas Merton. This broad contemplative tradition has given the Church many gifts, such as the Rule of St. Benedict and the *lectio divina* (divine reading of Scripture). Monasticism is a long and wonderful tradition.

However, others, such as Wesley understood spiritual formation to occur *in the world*. This is the great *active tradition*. The mendicant orders, such as Dominicans and Franciscans, also renounced the world and entered into the consecrated life. However, they lived their formation actively in the world, preaching the gospel and serving the poor. St. Dominic founded the Dominicans as a preaching order. St. Francis of Assisi founded the Franciscans as an order to serve the poor. Wesley loved both the contemplative and active traditions, but he was drawn more powerfully to the latter. Wesley formed his disciples in the context of actively serving in the world. Wesley understood, for example, that if you really want to be formed spiritually you should be eager to serve in a place of pain, rolling up your sleeves and getting your hands dirty. **While Wesley was deeply committed to prayer and contemplation, he really couldn't imagine catechesis without missional action.** Holiness, for Wesley, while personal, required actions. This missional philosophy was crucial for Wesley's view of catechesis. Wesley took his new preachers to the brickyards and into the prisons. Wesley saw the world as his parish and as God's greatest spiritual workshop. God shapes and forms His disciples to understand what it means to take up their crosses and follow Him on the anvil of a suffering world. Thus, the Wesleyan tradition believes that spiritual formation occurs in the context of active service in the world.

It is, of course, a grave error to interpret Wesley's social activism as either a form of "works-righteousness" (we are justified through our works) or the kind of humanistic social agenda that so often masquerades as Christianity. Wesley sought to avoid a works doctrine, hence Wesley's advocacy for prevenient grace and waiting "in the means of grace." All action in the world takes place as a response to His revelation in the Word and in Christ.



## **BUILD BROAD UNITY AROUND CORE ORTHODOXY**

John Wesley's reluctance to produce any precise doctrinal formulation for the "people called Methodist," along with his "catholic spirit," have led many to wrongly conclude that Wesley was indifferent to the core doctrines of historic Christianity. People often quote Wesley's famous dictum taken from 2 Kings 10:15: "If thine heart is as my heart, give me thine hand," as a kind of theological "blank check" to endorse the most bizarre departures from historic Christianity. However, Wesley was fully orthodox and fully ecumenical in a way that inspires us today. Wesley embraced considerable diversity among Christians with different convictions; yet, Wesley frequently found himself embroiled in various controversies with Roman Catholics, Anglican bishops and Calvinists. He firmly upheld strong theological convictions and all of the historic Christian confessions. Wesley would have been dismayed at the erosion of orthodoxy in mainline churches due to the increasing embrace of secular ideologies and a post-modern epistemology. Both ecumenical *and* orthodox, Wesley held firm convictions *but* had an irenic spirit and warm heart toward those with whom he disagreed. Even in disagreement, Wesley embraced a peaceful, kind spirit because of his understanding of theological enquiry.

Wesley understood the doctrine of the catechesis of new pastors and believers to involve unity and diversity, to combine experience with practice and to see the entire world as their parish.



## ALLOW FOR DIVERSITY ON MATTERS OUTSIDE OF CORE ORTHODOXY

Wesley firmly distinguished between the theological unity necessary to our identity as Christians, while allowing for broad diversity in the non-essentials of the faith. Historically, this idea has been expressed through the terms *kerygma* and *adiaphora*. The word *kerygma* comes from the Greek word meaning “proclamation,” referring to the core essentials of the Christian faith as expressed in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Wesley committed himself firmly to the historic core of Christian proclamation. The word *adiaphora* comes from the Greek word *adiaforus*, which as used by the Stoics, meant “things indifferent.” Thus, the *adiaphora* refers to those differences held by Christians that “are not sufficiently central to warrant continuing division or dispute.”<sup>4</sup>

In Wesley’s day Christian belief directly related to national identity. In other words, if someone lived in England, they followed the faith and practice of the Anglican Church of England. If born in Scotland, they followed the faith and practice of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Christians in a particular geographic region were compelled to reach agreement with the broad essentials of the Christian faith, the *kerygma*, and all the diverse particulars (*adiaphora*) of the national church. However, Wesley forcibly rejected this territorial understanding of Christian identity. In Wesley’s sermon, *Catholic Spirit*, he says:

“I know it is commonly supposed, that the place of our birth fixes the Church to which we ought to belong...I was once a zealous maintainer of this; but I find many reasons to abate of this zeal. I fear it is attended with such difficulties as no reasonable man

can get over: Not the least of which is, that if this rule had took place, there could have been no Reformation from Popery; seeing it entirely destroys the right of private judgment, on which the whole Reformation stands.”<sup>5</sup>

Wesley also argued that Christians should be able to dwell together in harmony even if they disagreed about basic convictions, such as the forms of church government, the modes of baptism or the administration of the Lord’s Supper. However, Wesley wisely distinguished between “catholic spirit” and “latitudinarianism.” The latter refers to those who engage in endless speculation about the essentials of the gospel or indifferently lack convictions. In contrast, Wesley argues that “a man of truly catholic spirit” does not have the right to set up his or her own form of religion. Rather, a Christian should be “as fixed as the sun in his [or her] judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine.”<sup>6</sup> Wesley called his hearers to “go, first, and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ, and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit.”<sup>7</sup> Wesley built his ecumenism on the foundation of a shared theological orthodoxy concerning the historic essentials of the Christian faith.

As we explore Wesley’s doctrinal framework, we discover that Wesley was deeply committed to historic Christian orthodoxy. Despite disagreements, Wesley maintained a very generous spirit of cooperation and collaboration. In addition, Wesley firmly believed in the importance of practical experience.

Scholars note that, unlike the earlier 16th century Reformers, Wesley’s theology was not set forth in a sustained, systematic fashion. Rather, Wesley’s theology was derived from his sermons, short treatises, exegetical notes, journals and many letters of correspondence. Rightfully, Wesley suspicioned theology set forth in isolation from the lived experience of Christians. Wesley formed his core beliefs around his fundamental commitment to the experience of Christian conversion, the need to apply theology to the practical challenges of the Christian life and the social

needs of the larger society. Wesley insisted that all his preachers learn his notes to the New Testament so that they would be fully Wesleyan in their theology. Wesley insisted that his preachers expound his canonical sermons to their congregations as a form of sermonic catechesis! Wesley was a genius in knowing how to teach doctrine. He didn't teach through the rote memorization of questions and answers, but through the lively proclamation of doctrine by living congregations of believers!

Wesley's emphasis on theopraxis and his reluctance to set forth a Methodist "creed" for those in the movement was not because Wesley was indifferent toward theology or the need for doctrinal clarity. Wesley understood faith in Christ as, first and foremost, a response to God's saving initiative, as opposed to merely granting mental assent to a certain defined set of dogmatic formulations, however true. Wesley was a trained theologian and preacher of the gospel long before his famous heartwarming experience at Aldersgate May 24, 1738. Wesley's conversion experience at Aldersgate transformed his preaching and his understanding of the Christian gospel. Prior to Aldersgate, Wesley saw the gospel as beginning in the mind of the Christian as he or she learned to affirm the truths of the Christian faith. After Aldersgate, Wesley understood that Christianity begins as a religion of the heart. Wesley's post-Aldersgate theology looked for the initiative of God in the life of the believer through conversion. Only then, can a person respond to God's grace through doctrinal or theological positions. As Wesley scholar Albert Outler observes, "Christian experience adds nothing to the substance of Christian truth; its distinctive truth is to energize the heart so as to enable the believer to speak and do the truth in love."<sup>8</sup>

This conversion emphasis created the basis for a new frontier in how theology could be simultaneously defining and fixed, as well as ecumenical and generous. To Wesley, the emphasis no longer focused on whether your brother and sister shared your precise view of baptism, church government or predestination. The starting point first recognized our common experience as those who have been converted by the work of the

Holy Spirit. For this reason, Wesley added “experience” to the traditional Anglican triad of scripture, tradition and reason, forming the famous Wesleyan quadrilateral. Wesley’s theology became rooted in the shared evangelical experience. Wesley not only encouraged Christians to embrace the theological distinctives of their tradition, but also to embrace people of genuine Christian experience who differed on matters that did not undermine the heart of historic Christian faith. Wesley says:

“The person of a ‘catholic spirit’... is steadily fixed in his religious principles, in what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus; while he firmly adheres to that worship of God which he judges to be most acceptable in his sight; ... his heart is enlarged toward all mankind.... This is catholic or universal love.... For love alone gives the title to this character-catholic love is a catholic spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

The person of “a catholic spirit,” while not being indifferent to “opinions,” does not base Christian love and concern upon agreement in “opinion.”<sup>10</sup>



## **JOIN A MOVEMENT LARGER THAN YOUR CHURCH OR DENOMINATION**

For Wesley, theology arises as a response to God’s prior initiative, lest it become a dead letter of endless intellectual speculation un-tethered from a vibrant, warm heart. The third and final aspect of this doctrine we call, The World is My Parish.

The final feature of Wesley’s theology as it relates to doctrine was his early appreciation for “global Christianity.” However, few have given proper recognition to Wesley as one of the leading forerunners of conceptualizing



the church in its full global, rather than sectarian, dimensions. In the post-Aldersgate period, Wesley's preaching became so controversial that the Church of England barred him from preaching in their pulpits. Since he continued to preach in the open fields, the church charged him of "trespassing" on the parishes of other ministers. He famously replied to this charge in a letter written in March of 1739, saying, "The world is my parish." In the letter he continues, stating, "I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right and my bounden duty to declare, unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation."<sup>11</sup>

Modern day Christians find it difficult to fully comprehend the radical nature of this statement. However, the territorial conceptions, as noted earlier, were so strong that the Church considered preaching the gospel to those outside your parish heresy. These territorial conceptions were one of the biggest barriers to the emergence of the Protestant missionary movement. In contrast, Wesley first conceptualized the Church in its full global dimensions and only secondarily in its particularity as, for example, Methodist Christians. Wesley asked why he should not preach the gospel in "Europe, Asia, Africa or America" for, with the Apostle Paul, he declared, "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel (1 Cor. 9:16-19). Wesley declared that he was prepared "to go to Abyssinia or China, or whithersoever it shall please God by this conviction to call me."<sup>12</sup> Wesley understood that the church of Jesus Christ is indestructible, since Christ is the Lord of the Church and has promised to build His church. However, Wesley did not tie this indestructibility with any particular institutional manifestation. With the dramatic rise of Christians from the Majority World, many of whom not tracing their history to the Reformation, the Church needs to discover a deeper ecumenism that unites all true Christians. Wesley anticipated the future multi-cultural diversity of the Church and the common experience of rebirth from above that unites all Christians of every age.

- 1 Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 2:189.
- 2 John Wesley, Sermon 16, *Means of Grace*.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 John Westerdale Bowker, *The Sacred Neuron* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 120.
- 5 John Wesley, *Catholic Spirit*, 496.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 502.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Albert Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral – in John Wesley." *Wesley Center for Applied Theology*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan\\_theology/theojrnl/16-20/20-01.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan_theology/theojrnl/16-20/20-01.htm) (accessed September, 2008).
- 9 John Wesley, *Catholic Spirit*, 503.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 493, 495.
- 11 Frank Baker, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 25:616.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 615.

This Seedbed Short is a seamless and edited version of a series of blog posts that originally appeared on [timothytennent.com](http://timothytennent.com). Visit this site to access more of Dr. Tennent's work. Follow Dr. Tennent on Twitter @timtennent.

## About the Author



Dr. Timothy C. Tennent has served as President since July 2009. Prior to coming to Asbury Theological Seminary, Dr. Tennent was the professor of World Missions and Indian Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary where he served since 1998. Ordained in the United Methodist Church in 1984, he has pastored churches in Georgia, and in several of the largest churches in New England. Since 1989, he has taught annually as an adjunct professor at the New Theological College in Dehra Dun, India. He is a frequent conference speaker around the country and throughout the world, including numerous countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Dr. Tennent received his M.Div. from Gordon-Conwell, a Th.M. from Princeton Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He is also a 2008 graduate of a three-year mentor project in Academic Leadership sponsored by the Lilly endowment.

Dr. Tennent is the author of numerous books and articles. His books include, *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations* (ISPCK), *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable* (Baker Academic), *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Zondervan) and *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the 21st Century* (Kregel Academic).

Dr. Tennent's wife, Julie, is also a graduate of Gordon-Conwell, has led numerous Bible Studies and is active in Friendship International in Lexington, Ky. She is a church organist and pianist, having produced several CDs and a cantata known as *All the Glory*. The Tennents have two children. Jonathan is currently a graduate student at the University of Kentucky and Bethany is a missionary serving with AIM in Tanzania.

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