

[A]Holy Spirit, Communities of Faith, and Leadership for Today

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Rapid change is a regular feature of North American culture in the 21st century. The stress of it is felt in many kinds of organization, as well as by individuals. One of the common responses in historic Christian organizations has been a proliferation of conversations about leadership: “If only clergy leaders would do this, ...” “If at least some lay leaders would do that...” A few of these conversations have been about cultivating leadership skills of one particular kind or another.¹ Considerable borrowing from studies of business leadership occurs in these conversations. The goal is to foster the kind of responsiveness in Christian organizations that cultural change seems to require.

I propose to initiate an additional conversational thread about leadership here. I invite readers to engage in a theological reflection on how divine presence is manifest in the world, in order to see what light it might shed on distinctively Christian foundations for leadership. To the extent that the purpose of communities of faith is to cooperate with the *misseo Dei*, leadership of those communities has the purpose of facilitating the discernment and responsiveness of the community in its location.² This is a particular role for leadership, a role unparalleled in organizations defined by human purposes alone. We begin the thread by considering this leadership role in light of the ways we understand Holy Spirit, who empowers and enacts the *misseo Dei*, what God is doing in the world. Since the essay appears in a volume honoring the

¹ See, for instance, the work of Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk on “missional leadership” in *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (Jossey-Bass, 2006).

² Framing the question of leadership in this way is significantly influenced by the conversation about mission initiated by David Bosch’s work, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Boston: Orbis, 1991).

work of a historian of Methodism, it is fitting to begin this theological reflection with John Wesley's account of Holy Spirit.³

[B]Wesley's Focus on the Work of Holy Spirit in Individuals

John Wesley's theology of the Holy Spirit's work of redemption and sanctification in individuals contributed to the liberation of persons whose individual worth was not thoroughly affirmed in their cultural contexts. The appeal of Wesleyan theological emphases, particularly universal atonement, in both England and North America lay in its being heard to undermine existing structures that privileged those with greater economic means. That is, the message was that all persons can be recipients of divine grace, and it emphasized that all persons who respond to that grace with trust and the will to grow in holiness with divine help are honored in the community of faith. Therein having greater economic means is neither an indicator of one's status with God nor a source of privilege; rather, it yields both greater responsibility and the threat of greater temptation.

Following Albert Outler's interpretive direction, we can identify two primary ways in which John Wesley theorized the Christian community's experience of Holy Spirit as a distinctive expression of the triune God.⁴ First, Wesley held that Holy Spirit is the source of life itself, both for all creatures and further, in a distinctive way, for human beings, made in likeness to the divine.

It is true, while we have a being "*in him* we must live, and move, and have our being,"

but this we do now, not in a *filial* way, but only in a *servile* one, as all, even the meanest

³ I am glad to acknowledge indebtedness to Jean Miller Schmidt's historical work from the outset of this paper. Her interrogation of the relationship between cultures and the faith experience of marginalized persons, particularly women, invites the questions for our own constructive theological thinking that this paper seeks to explore. Without the recognition of those relationships in Methodism's past it is almost impossible to explore them in the present. Her students and readers continue to experience the challenge to liberative praxis that her work invites.

⁴ Albert C. Outler, "A Focus on the Holy Spirit: Spirit and Spirituality in John Wesley," *Quarterly Review*, Summer 1988, 3-18.

creatures, exist in him. It is one thing to receive from God an ability to walk and speak, eat and digest, -- to be supported by his hand as a part of this earthly creation, and upon the same terms with it, for farther trial or vengeance; and another, to receive from him a life which is his own likeness, -- to have within us something which is not of this creation, and which is nourished by his own immediate word and power.⁵

The metaphor of spirit as breath operates as a description of dependence on the divine power inspiring life in all its forms, moment by moment, breath by breath. Human being then also receives its distinctive identity, a likeness to God that is immediately sustained by Holy Spirit.

The second theorization was at the core of Wesley's preaching, aimed at evangelizing and eliciting response, namely Holy Spirit is witness to our individual adoption as children of God. This witness has two acts, each of which is gifted by the Spirit: an internal witness and our own spirit's response. The internal witness may or may not have a voice. It consists in a personal appropriation of God's justifying act in Jesus Christ—knowing that Christ died, not just for the world, but also *for me*. Such knowledge is not merely intellectual or theoretical, it is personal in a way that provides complete assurance of one's own status in relationship with God; *I am beloved and redeemed*. Such a conviction comes as gift rather than as an achievement. It is conceived, without doubt, to be a direct work of the Spirit.

This internal witness is seconded by the witness of our own spirits in response. Our spirits produce fruits—not only inward fruits of joy, peace, and holiness of mind but also outward fruits of love-of-neighbor and holiness-of-action. These fruits also come to us as gifts with which we choose to cooperate. Because we are aware that we are not capable of generating the fruits on our own, it is clear to us that they, too, are gifts of the Spirit.

⁵ John Wesley, "On the Holy Spirit" Sermon 141, I.7.

It might seem possible either to falsely identify the internal witness or to mimic the fruits. We could get caught up in an emotional moment and convince ourselves that we are assured, or we could produce the evidence of fruits as an act of will, making the fruits into our own works. In Wesley's mind, there can be no doubt about the divine source once *both* assurance and fruits have appeared; activity of Holy Spirit is then unmistakable.

In arriving at that twofold account, Wesley assumed five features in his references to Holy Spirit. First, this Spirit has agency. It can and does act independently in and through the world and the world's constituent parts, human and non-human. Second, Holy Spirit works in individual lives in direct and immediate ways. Third, on principle, there is no reason that Spirit cannot work in every single individual—it does not respect rank or human forms of privilege. Fourth, what can limit the work of Holy Spirit is an individual's negative exercise of free will. Holy Spirit requires cooperation—at a minimum, passive cooperation. Holy Spirit respects individual free will. This assumption he took to be a necessary correlate of human responsibility. If the Spirit can override free will, then no persons whose will the Spirit chooses not to override are responsible for the consequences of their exercise of that free will any longer. Fifth, Holy Spirit is focused on individual transformation. In Wesley's account, the reign of God over civic structures and communities was not addressed. He expected inward individual holiness to result in relational, social holiness between persons. But Wesley did not hold that the social structures which love requires are a focus of Spirit's direct attention—at least in his preached account of Spirit. The point is not that some of these structures were beyond Wesley's attention in practice, but that these practices were not theorized as work of Holy Spirit in his preaching.

Wesley did attend carefully to the creation of communities of accountability in his instituting class meeting – the fundamental unit of the Methodist Societies in the 18th century and

the first third of the 19th century. One was a member, first and foremost, of a class meeting, not of a church or of a worshipping community. Participation in class meeting was the necessary prerequisite for participation in the sacramental worship life of the Societies, particularly in the love feasts held at quarterly conference.⁶ The practice of class meeting included several practices of community that might be theorized as work of Holy Spirit. In particular, confession, forgiveness, and discernment (including both problem-solving and identifying goals and decision-making), each of which actions occurs with greater power in the context of a gathering of two or more persons. When these are theorized in light of Wesley's theorization of each individual's responsibility, they are transformed from mechanisms for control of a class of people into mechanisms of their own empowerment. And that appears to be how they were experienced and why they were embraced by many early participants in the Methodist movement.⁷

Wesley's theorization of individual responsibility for responding to God, not just initially at justification but continually through sanctification, yielded an anthropology in which every person is recognized to be a responsible being. Responsibility is possible only when an individual's free will is recognized as a constituent feature of his or her personhood. Every individual's agency is recognized, affirmed, and strengthened by the practices of the movement. In the cultural context of 18th century England and its colonies, this tenet was revolutionary. It

⁶ Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America, vol 1: A History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 96-97.

⁷ The response of women and of both enslaved and free Africans in America impelled the movement, as testified by membership records and the oft-repeated founding stories about Barbara Heck, Elizabeth Strawbridge and others. See Richey, Rowe and Schmidt, *ibid* 54-58, 100-101 and Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism 1760-1968* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

appealed particularly to women, to slaves and free Blacks, and to white men whose skills as artisans were seen to be potentially skills used by entrepreneurs of small businesses.⁸

Wesley was not himself in any of these classes of persons. As a consequence, he did not seem to see or appreciate the power of the transformation in identity involved. This is clearly visible in his attempts to maintain control over the movement of Methodists in North America – control that made sense for him to hold from the perspective of the old social order but that made no sense at all to those in North America who had experienced freedom and responsibility in Christ through the direct work of Holy Spirit.

[B]Work of Holy Spirit in Communities of Faith

All of this focus on individual transformation as likewise a transformation of the social order was fitted to situations of the late 18th and 19th centuries. In North America today, however, we have come to a time in which an individualism that was initially experienced in contexts of community has come to overwhelm those communal contexts. Further, by the late 20th century individualism had been largely co-opted by consumerism, which simultaneously relies upon a high degree of individual choice and a low recognition of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility. This trend has allowed for the manipulation of individual desire through advertising in ways that are experienced, in turn, as bondage—a narrowing of the capacity to recognize many of the responses available to participants within a dynamic, interconnected, living creation.

The community of faith's interaction with Holy Spirit needs to be theorized anew in order to temper the effects of current cultural contexts. Friedrich Schleiermacher's thought demonstrates that it is possible to theorize the work of Holy Spirit in community without

⁸ See John Wigger for an extended historical explication of this point in the opening chapters of *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

rejecting or obscuring the kinds of insights Wesley articulated about the work of Holy Spirit in individuals. Schleiermacher's understanding of the work of Holy Spirit in individuals is consistent with Wesley's, but it goes on to demonstrate ways in which individuals are interconnected within faith community, itself viewed as an activity in which Holy Spirit is engaged throughout.

It is not necessary to adopt Schleiermacher's specific doctrinal formulations in order to be assisted by his work. For our purposes here, we need only to identify the experiences of faith community that he seeks to explain. In *Christian Faith*, and consistently in his preaching as well,⁹ Schleiermacher distinguishes between the structures of church, viewed as institution and as a human entity, on the one hand, and the experience of faith community, on the other hand. This understanding is completely consistent with Wesley's chosen relationship with the Church of England. Schleiermacher suggests that Christian communities of faith exist only within the larger context of institutional church structures, but they are subsets within that larger context, not to be confused with those structures themselves. Identifying that specific feature of our experience of faith community can enable us to notice its existence in space and time precisely as a function of the qualities of relationship that are occurring among persons.

Schleiermacher theorized the interpersonal context of redemption because he noticed that saving faith is closely associated with a person's being in relationship with one or more persons of vital faith, the same kind of relationship that Jesus Christ had with each of the men and women who followed him on a daily basis. For this reason, interpersonal contexts, such as the class meetings that Wesley so skillfully used as the basis of Methodist Societies, seem to be essential for the sharing of saving faith in Jesus Christ in later times as well. Interpersonal

⁹ See Catherine Kelsey, *Schleiermacher's Preaching, Dogmatics, and Biblical Criticism: The Interpretation of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John* (Portland: Pickwick Publications, 2007) for a full description of Schleiermacher's preaching and its relationships to his systematic theological work.

contexts come to be visible realms within which Holy Spirit moves and works both visibly and invisibly.

This insight led Schleiermacher to attend in detail to the nature of those interpersonal contexts, or interconnected relationships, that constitute institutional church structures. Institutional church is a human construction, with all of the possibilities that humans can create and all the limitations that are inevitable. Because it is a human construction it can appropriately take many different forms, as demonstrated in the many branches of Christian church. The particular form of the human construction is not its essential feature. God's act through Holy Spirit constituting a community of faith within the humanly constructed structure is what defines the church structure's purpose. When and where there is a community of faith, that community is called into being by Holy Spirit and this Spirit is what he calls the "common spirit" of that community. The common spirit is a gift to the community in the midst of its complex relationships and interactions; it is neither an accomplishment of the community nor a characteristic of the community apart from the gift of the divine Spirit in each moment. A community of faith exists only by virtue of its receiving this gift as that which shapes and enlivens its human interactions within each present occasion. A community of faith is not an entity with a life of its own; it exists as gift of Spirit. In Schleiermacher's construction, community with one another enacts communion with God in Christ. It is participation in the being of God, participation in divine love.

Hence, a community of faith is constituted first by God's act and second by cooperation with that act—exactly the same sequence that Wesley described in the process of individual salvation. Moreover, exactly as for individual salvation in Wesley's thought, this reception and cooperation happens moment by moment, rather than permanently in one action. Human

cooperation with the gift of Spirit's constituting a community has a beginning point, to which the community will need to return again and again when the patterns of sin close it to the gift of Spirit. Patterns of sin are brought to the community by its members, patterns of sin overwhelm the community from its cultural context, and patterns of sin result from the community's own habits, old and new. Prior to completion of the reign of God, this continuing rhythm of movement-into-sin and the gift of return-to-relationship is to be expected. Wesley's practices of accountability, not just for individuals but also for class meetings and societies, indicate that he shared this expectation.

Thus, Schleiermacher's theorization helps us to recognize a potential extension of Wesley's understanding of the work of Holy Spirit. A gathering in the life of a church can become a community of faith when the gathering receives and responds to a gift of Holy Spirit. The Spirit's gifts are transformative of communities, not just of individuals. Before considering any potential extension of this theorization into the work of Holy Spirit within civic space, it is both helpful and perhaps essential to notice how leadership occurs in actual communities of faith as they are being constituted by Spirit's gifts.

[B]Leadership in Communities of Faith

When we theorize the activity of Holy Spirit in both individual lives and in communities of faith, what implications begin to emerge? Let us begin to answer this question by identifying additional features of the community of faith itself. More specifically, then, we ask: When a community of faith is Spirit-inspired, how does it function?

We have already noticed that Schleiermacher's account of community of faith parallels Wesley's account of individual faith—Spirit brings gifts and the community or individual receives and cooperates with each gift. We find there is joy in the receiving and eagerness to

cooperate. Communities involve complex interactions between all the individual participants. What is predominantly going on when those interactions are joyfully receiving Spirit's gifts? Listening and attending are always occurring in multiple directions, listening and attending that are intent and intentional and skilled. There is listening to ideas and also significant listening to and observing of emotions, some of which are too deep for words and may be uttered in ecstasy or in tears, posture, gesture or tone of voice. What is heard is mirrored, or relived in feedback, to check for accuracy and to slow down the process sufficiently so that it can be considered well before a fuller response arises. This process of consideration includes comparing what is heard with other sources, pondering it for its implications, seeking out its unspoken corollaries—in a word, discernment.¹⁰ A community of faith receives Spirit's gifts through the quality of its listening and attending together. And when complex listening and attending, or discernment, is happening in a community of faith, leadership is exercised by anyone and everyone who assists others to skillfully engage. Thus, leadership is diffused throughout the community.

Within an inspired community, who seems to exercise such leadership most easily and most frequently and unobtrusively? Those who daily practice habits of complex listening and attending—in prayer, in pondering scripture, in holding others in the divine presence, in centering oneself on Christ's divine love as a balance point. They are practicing in their individual lives the skills of discerning Spirit as it is embodied in a biblical text, in themselves, and in the world around them. As a result of their prayer, they are familiar with a multitude of distractions to careful listening and attending, and they have identified a number of effective ways to focus on the nuances in the midst of distraction. They are aware of distortions their lives create in their own hearing, and so they welcome comparing and sharing with others. They are at

¹⁰ The word "discernment" is often associated with quiet reception. Here I intend to indicate that it may also refer to active listening and noisy responses.

ease in the paradox that discernment involves simultaneous simplicity and complexity, because they have experienced it frequently.

Among those who are praying daily, those who also seek and build significant relationships with persons who are different from themselves are the most likely to facilitate the participation of others in a community. Just as with prayer, it takes practice to become interconnected. Those who have practiced moving through the initial awkwardness of not even knowing what questions to ask as one seeks to listen and attend, move through the awkwardness more easily. This is the hospitality of welcoming each stranger into one's life as an incarnation of Christ, as one who mediates divine presence in ways that one has not yet discovered.

When a community of faith is Spirit-inspired, persons who listen and attend in prayer regularly and who welcome the stranger are both leading themselves and facilitating the leadership of those with different experience or possibly less skill. Discerning listening and attending happens because they are helping or cooperating in it happening in response to Spirit's active presence.

Leadership in an inspired community of faith, then, is fostered by encouraging each individual to cultivate those two aspects of each one's own individual life – daily listening/attending prayer and seeking connection with those who are different. When community of faith is defined by its responsiveness to the activity of Holy Spirit, then it is also helpful to name the foundational practices of leadership that can emerge in that condition of responsiveness.

Whether a leader is a volunteer designated for a particular role or a person whose career is set aside for leadership in church, the foundational practices for leadership when a community of faith is responsive to Holy Spirit are the same: daily listening/attending prayer and seeking

connection with those who are different. The differences between laity and clergy, between volunteer and staff, between credentials and experience, are all irrelevant at this point. When a community of faith is inspired by Spirit the persons who act as leaders, fostering the participation and responsiveness of all, are practiced listeners to Spirit and to persons, attentive in response to Spirit and to persons—in short, discerners of where Spirit may be at work.

This tells us something significant about designated leadership as a role and skill set. Designated leaders prepare the people with whom they are working to exercise leadership themselves in their responses to what is given by Spirit in the community. Designated leaders prepare environments in which a gathered people may easily and confidently receive Spirit's gifts and cooperate with them. This is as true for occasions for decision-making meetings as it is for worship. The skills involved are not difficult to learn IF one is engaging the foundational practices. Without the foundational practices there can be little recognition of the actual process of engagement with Spirit as a possibility, let alone as a possibility for which preparations can be made.

Consequently, it makes little sense to select persons as designated leaders who are not engaging in the foundational practices. Such persons are ill-equipped to assist the community to become a community of faith.

[B]Work of Holy Spirit in Civic Community

Having noticed how communities of faith function when they are Spirit-inspired, we can take a further step of examining the work of Holy Spirit in civic community. It is rare in American civic relations to experience public occasions in which intentional listening and attending occurs and Spirit's presence becomes evident. Yet, it does happen sometimes, as the

mythology of town meeting reminds us. In most Christian theories of Holy Spirit a claim is made for divine presence in every time and place. This would suggest that it is possible to receive and respond to Spirit's gifts in the public, civic contexts as well.

Apart from his notes and lectures on Christian ethics, Schleiermacher's doctrinal theorization of Holy Spirit did not address civic spaces, perhaps because in his context public occasions for mutual listening and attending, or open discernment, did not exist and theorization of them might well have been perceived as a direct threat to political monarchy. In particular, the broader public implications of Schleiermacher's work were so threatening to political power in Prussia in the decade after Waterloo (1815) that he was under constant government investigation. Thus, there were multiple reasons why his doctrinal theorization of Holy Spirit's operation did not extend to Spirit's role in civic community and appeared to limit Spirit to operating within church structures. This result, however, is entirely inconsistent with both Christian experience and Christian claims for the ubiquity of divine presence in the created world, as he did show in his Christian ethics.¹¹ This result would also require describing specific limitations in human capacity for discerning listening and attending. That is, the result implies that within church structures Spirit can be received and discernment occur and in the public sphere Spirit cannot be directly received. No basis for such a difference in human capacity in one location versus another is evident in Schleiermacher's thought. The other alternative, that Spirit simply chooses not to operate in public contexts, is equally unsupported in his thought.

¹¹ Christian ethics is the second half of Christian doctrine, in Schleiermacher's conception of theology. See James Brandt, *Selections from Schleiermacher's Christian Ethics*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011) for excerpts from Schleiermacher's lectures on Christian ethics in English and Hermann Peiter, *Christliche Ethik bei Schleiermacher: Gesammelte Aufsätze und Besprechungen/Christian Ethics according to Schleiermacher: Collected Essays and Reviews*, A bilingual edition ed. by Terrence Tice (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2010) for a thorough exposition of the dimensions and implications of his ethics.

So, if we extend our theorization beyond Wesley and Schleiermacher, we might encourage persons in the community of faith who are skilled at creating environments in which significant listening and attending occurs in welcoming one another across differences to use those skills in the broader public, civic sphere as well. It would be a non-coercive gift, one with intrinsic value in any democracy. It would also be a way of sharing the best that communities of faith know without having to use religious language.¹² And it would allow for occasions to receive and respond to Spirit's gifts without having to commit to a particular theorization of Spirit as giver.

In a time of rapid change, it will help us to recall that we are surrounded by divine presence and purpose as we face change and are changed. Our most effective responses to change will be those that open us to discern Spirit's presence and that help us to respond to Spirit's gifts. This process has always involved listening and attending. In the midst of rapid, confusing change it involves discernment with even greater care, particularly because we are accompanied by persons whose experience and being in the world can stretch our vision and imagination. We are not listening for a single voice to speak the way forward but, rather, for the harmonics and dissonances that exist among us. The Holy Spirit inspires us through this music and leads us through our singing, listening, attending, and responding together.

¹² Gary Gunderson in *Deeply Woven Roots: Improving the Quality of Life in Your Community* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997) identified the capacity of congregations to call people to the table and to listen together as strengths that congregations can offer in the building of healthy communities. What I identify here as gifts of Spirit are well-attested in descriptions of practice.