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New Life in the Risen Christ

A Wesleyan Theology of Baptism

GENERAL EDITOR

Jonathan A. Powers



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

NEW LIFE IN THE RISEN CHRIST
A Wesleyan Theology of Baptism

Wesleyan and Methodist Explorations

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CHAPTER 12

Baptism and Ecclesiology

Belonging and Becoming

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WHO ARE YOU? OR, stated slightly differently, to whom do you belong? These are crucial questions in contemporary society, and also in contemporary Christianity. Questions of identity and belonging dominate so much of our lives. Racial identity, national identity, gender identity, religious identity, and a host of other identifiers are coming under scrutiny—some would even say under attack—in today’s society. One’s appearance, language, nationality, political views, and sexual preference can all be used as means of inclusion or exclusion. This is not only a challenge in society at large, where issues related to migration, political identity, and religious identity feature as central concerns in social and political interaction. Questions of identity have also become central issues of reflection and contention within the Christian faith and the church.

One of the most topical examples of this struggle for identity and belonging in the church is the debate over the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy in The United Methodist Church (UMC).¹ Who is welcome in the church, and what are the theological criteria for belonging? If individuals or groups feel their identity and humanity is not recognized or celebrated within the church, how does this impact upon their relationship with

1. Williams, “Why a Vote on Gay Clergy?”

the church or the church's relationship with them? As Christianity has spread throughout the world and different cultural, historical, social, and theological perspectives of the relationship between faith and life have emerged, it is not easy to say what exactly it means to be Christian or to define the identity and nature of the church in a globalized, and increasingly diverse, world.²

For Wesleyans, baptism has been an important rite to help us to understand to whom we belong and who we truly are. It is a sacrament of belonging and a sacrament of becoming. This chapter thus considers the sacrament of baptism in relation to Christian identity and ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) and proposes that reacquaintance with John Wesley's understanding of baptism, in both objective and subjective terms, is foundational in discovering the meaning of belonging and becoming in the church.

The Challenge of a Changing Ecclesiology

What is the church? This is not an easy question to answer definitively. Any answer to the question will first have to be cognizant of various, important historical shifts that have shaped theological understandings of the church. The Nicene Creed confesses Christians believe the church is "one, holy, catholic and apostolic."³ Yet, as James K. A. Smith points out in his book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, the culture, location, structure, and liturgy of contemporary multinational denominations, such as the UMC, is not easily compared with the churches of the New Testament or the church at the time of writing the Nicene Creed.⁴ The Christian church has gone from being a marginal religious sect located on the borders of society and dispersed in homes, to a highly organized, socially powerful, cultural and religious institution with buildings, employees, and media outlets. So, in answering the question, "What is the church?" the history of the church must be considered.

Second, as has already been suggested above, the social and cultural location of the church has changed significantly throughout its history. Moreover, it would be a misnomer to believe the church occupies the same social and cultural location in every society where it exists today.

2. Forster, "New Directions," 267–75.

3. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 248.

4. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 19–22.

Kirsteen Kim and Sebastian Kim speak of contemporary Christianity as a “transregional” religion that “does not have one single strand of development, one centre, or a linear history but is diffuse, locally divergent and adapted to different contexts.”⁵ From the small house churches of China or Algeria to the Nigerian and North American mega-churches, there is a great deal of difference in structure, style, polity, and theology. Moreover, in recent decades there have been shifts not only in the diversity of expressions of Christianity and understanding of what it means to be the church, but there has also been a shift in the epicenter of Christian identity.

If one were to visit the average Christian book store, seminary library, or even watch some contemporary Christian television broadcast, one could be fooled into thinking that “Christians are un-black, un-poor, and un-young.”⁶ It seems that white, Protestant men from Westernized contexts have populated theological libraries with their books, academic articles, sermons, courses, and ideas. However, a significant shift has already taken place in global Christianity, as was witnessed in the February 26, 2019, vote for the “Traditional Plan” at the United Methodist General Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. Some American members of the UMC felt that the denomination had been hijacked by powerful constituencies from outside of the United States whose cultural and theological values are more conservative than the theology and values that had developed in United Methodism in the United States in recent decades.⁷

Philip Jenkins, a sociologist of religion, suggests that events such as these will become more and more common since the “center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably away from Europe, southward, to Africa and Latin America, and eastward, toward Asia. Today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in those regions.”⁸ Undoubtedly, the face, voice, and concerns of the epicenter of Christianity have changed.

Research shows that in the presence of such changes and challenges to theological and ecclesiological identity there are two general responses. First, there is a tendency toward *social and theological protectionism*. Second, some churches respond with a form of *sociotheological*

5. Kim and Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion*, sec. 200 of 10074.

6. Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 1.

7. cf., Birch, “Retired Bible Scholar.”

8. Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 1.

assimilation and transformation.⁹ As we shall see, notions of identity lie at the heart of both responses. Those who tend toward *social and theological protectionism* tend to retreat into what are considered to be “traditional” theologies and practices, such as historically held beliefs, religious values, and polity. This is fuelled by a desire to protect what is considered to be an “established” identity—also called an “in-group” identity¹⁰—against the challenges that emanate from “new” ideas, beliefs, and practices that emerge from forms of cultural or social difference, or persons and groupings that represent the cultural “other.”¹¹

Those groupings that choose a form of *sociotheological assimilation and transformation*, seek to find ways of retaining aspects of their traditional identity while making some identity shifts in relation to challenges from social, contextual, political, or theological spheres. Examples of this would be “post-congregational” churches in secularizing Western countries that have engaged in Fresh Expressions of church.¹² The life of one of these congregations may be radically different from that of a contemporary suburban church in Atlanta (for example). Some of these churches have no Sunday services, no formal liturgy, preaching, or sacraments. Many do not have buildings or clergy. They may meet in a bar or restaurant for fellowship and discipleship structured around a meal and discussion, with many of the traditional functions of the church absent or relegated to private spaces (such as adult baptisms in homes or the Eucharist as a community love feast).¹³ The Fresh Expressions movement, which emerged from the Anglican Church, seems to embody what Paul Avis describes as the “vocation of Anglicanism,” seeking “to hold truths together in theology and practice in order that it may hold people together.”¹⁴ This is not all that different from what John Wesley aimed to achieve in what eventually became known as Methodism. Randy Maddox writes, “Methodism should be seen, at least in the first instance, as

9. Forster, “New Directions,” 267–75.

10. Forster, *(Im)Possibility of Forgiveness?*, 57–78.

11. Forster, “New Directions,” 271.

12. Mission and Public Affairs Council (Church of England), *Mission-Shaped Church*; Forster, “New Directions,” 272.

13. Sherwood, “As Traditional Believers”; Mission and Public Affairs Council (Church of England), *Mission-Shaped Church*.

14. Avis, *Vocation of Anglicanism*, 182.

a movement *within* the Church of England, rather than as a dissenting movement outside it.”¹⁵

However, churches, whether protectionist or assimilative, present some challenges in relation to traditional theologies and practices of baptism. Methodism has faced this tension between ecclesiological renewal and the sacraments throughout its history. John Wesley, as an Anglican priest, ascribed to relatively traditional views of the practice and theology of baptism.¹⁶ He believed baptism to be a sacrament that was to be administered, as was customary within Anglicanism in England and America at the time, by an ordained priest or bishop within the gathered service of worship on a Sunday.¹⁷ Does this mean that those who stand in the Wesleyan tradition should only ever perform baptism in the same ways as Wesley did in the 1700s?

It can be argued, as some have done, that Wesley was willing to break with traditional practices of baptism as a result of his theological convictions about the importance of the sacrament in a changing church context.¹⁸ John Wesley’s commitment to the importance of administering the sacraments (including baptism) as a part of church life and Christian discipleship led him to ordain clergy to serve American Methodist communities. For instance, on September 1–2, 1784, John Wesley ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey to serve as priests and appointed Thomas Coke as a superintendent minister; Coke soon after ordained Francis Asbury as a priest.¹⁹ The ordinations performed by Wesley were prompted by his concern that American Christians were being “starved of the sacraments because of the lack of clergy.”²⁰ Wesley was clearly trying to work out how to continue to serve the sacraments in the midst

15. Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 35.

16. Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 239.

17. Please see Geordan Hammond’s extensive discussion of John Wesley’s views, and practice, of baptism in, Hammond, *John Wesley in America*, 67–73.

18. See Thomas C. Oden’s discussion of how John Wesley engaged with new members of the Wesleyan societies who came from varied Christian traditions and so did not approach the practice of baptism in the same way: Oden, *John Wesley’s Teachings*, 3:185–214.

19. cf., Puglisi, *Process of Admission*, 155; Wigger, *American Saint*, 137; Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 66; Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 72; Richey, *Methodism in the American Forest*, 22.

20. Grass, *Modern Church History*, 95.

of contextual changes in his own time. He deemed the sacraments, as a “means of grace,” essential to what it means to be Christian.²¹

So, to return to where we started, it would seem identity and ecclesiology are in constant conversation with one another in the midst of contextual change. Who we are and what who we aspire to be shapes our faith and our churches. The converse is equally true: how the church constructs its belief and practice shapes its faith and identity. The claim was made earlier that for Wesleyans baptism helps us to understand both to whom we belong as well as who we truly are—it is a sacrament of belonging and a sacrament of becoming. John Wesley’s views on baptism clarify in what sense this claim can be substantiated.

John Wesley’s View of Baptism as a Means of Grace

The relationship between baptism and ecclesiology is not only complex in broad Christian terms, it is also complex in Methodist and Wesleyan theologies, as has already been shown. This can be related to the complex tension that exists between the objective and subjective understandings of the sacrament in John Wesley’s theological views on baptism. Wesley’s baptismal theology presents the tension between the subjective and objective understandings of the sacrament by upholding baptism as objective inclusion into the church, which must be held in tension with baptism as the subjective point at which the individual’s journey toward salvation begins.²²

In his 1756 tract, “A Treatise on Baptism,” John Wesley offers a fairly common view of baptism for his time.²³ In an objective sense, he states by “baptism we are admitted into the Church, and consequently made members of Christ . . .”²⁴ As was common among Anglicans of the time, the sacrament of baptism was seen not only as an objective sacrament of belonging to the church (i.e., membership), it was also seen as having salvific (regenerative) efficacy: “By water then, as a means, the water of baptism, we are regenerated, or born again . . .”²⁵ Yet, also here is a more

21. cf., Wesley, “Sermon 16, ‘The Means of Grace,’” 381; Wesley, *Plain Account*, 14; Wesley in Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today*, 238.

22. Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 239–41.

23. Wesley, “Treatise on Baptism,” 188–201.

24. Wesley, “Treatise on Baptism,” 190.

25. Wesley, “Treatise on Baptism,” 191.

subjective view—namely, that baptism initiates a salvific engagement between God and the baptized person. Wesley did not believe that baptism assured salvation, however. As *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* specifies, “By observation, he knew that those who had been baptized in infancy, which was the majority of persons in England, did not always live as if they were children of God and instead appeared more as children of the devil.”²⁶ Wesley believed that baptism initiated the “washing away the guilt of original sin by the application of the merits of Christ’s death.”²⁷ However, this did not mean that the person is “regenerated” or “saved” in the act of baptism.

It is not possible to understand Wesley’s views on baptism without placing them in the broader context of Wesleyan soteriology, which is a hybrid of Eastern and Western theological influences that engage the doctrines of justification and Christian perfection.²⁸ A great deal has been written about Wesley’s understanding of the *ordo salutis*, (the ‘order of salvation’) and its rich interplay between God’s grace and the choices and actions of human persons. Within Wesley’s order of salvation, God’s grace operates as “preventing or prevenient grace which elicits a first longing for God; justifying or pardoning grace, by which God brings an individual into a saving relationship; and sanctifying grace, which enables continued growth in faith.”²⁹ For John Wesley, baptism (in a subjective theological sense) was a “means of grace” whereby God begins God’s work of regeneration within the baptized person—this is by the operation of God’s “prevenient grace.”³⁰ Baptism was thus understood to be the beginning of a lifelong journey, or process, of salvation that starts with inclusion into the body of Christ—a response to God’s initiating activity—and is sealed in later life through a personal commitment to the promise of Christ. In short, baptism, from Wesley’s theological perspective, is understood as a sacrament of belonging and becoming.

26. Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 239.

27. Wesley, “Treatise on Baptism,” 190.

28. Forster, “On the 250th Anniversary,” 1–19.

29. Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 228.

30. See Karen B. Westerfield Tucker’s discussion of the means of grace in Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 225–44.

On baptism and (Mis)Recognition

The reception of Wesleyan baptismal theology across the last two centuries in various social, political, and ecclesial contexts has resulted in misunderstandings and misrecognitions of the objective and subjective dynamic of baptism (as discussed in the previous section). In particular, contemporary Methodists and Wesleyans have struggled to hold the objective and subjective views of baptism in a creative theological tension with one another as Wesley did. In large measure, this theological problem has come about because of the way contemporary understandings of the human person have reshaped understandings of personal relationship to social structures, which includes changing views of personal relationship to the community of the church.

In John Wesley's England, human identity, in large measure, was still based on notions of human sanctity and divine dignity.³¹ The human person was viewed in relation to religious and political structures of authority that accorded important aspects of identity and being such as rights, freedoms, and value.³² It is worth remembering this was the beginning of the era that would usher in significant political changes (the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789) as a result of emerging ideas on human dignity, equality, and freedom.³³ However, John Wesley's views on human identity and human freedom seem to be somewhat mixed. Some have described him as being "counter enlightenment"³⁴ and "largely a credulous and overbearing enthusiast whose devotion to biblicism and perfectionism shielded him from practical realities even in his own life."³⁵ There are others who describe him as a "son of the enlightenment."³⁶ Regardless of the view one takes, it can be safely concluded that contemporary views of the human person as having individual rights and a largely individual identity, which is free to associate or disassociate from religious and political powers, only came to the fore in the years since John Wesley's death.

31. Bauerschmidt, "Being Baptized," 250.

32. Loughlin, *Human Dignity*, 165–69.

33. Loughlin, *Human Dignity*, 167.

34. Thompson, "Anthropology," 41–55.

35. Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 66; cf., Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleyans*.

36. Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 66.

This has a significant bearing on engagement of Wesley's understanding of the human person, as well as Wesley's understanding of the relationship between persons and social structures (such as the church). By extension it also has a bearing on the interpretation of Wesley's soteriology, ecclesiology, and baptismal theology in relation to very different contemporary social and cultural contexts. The kind of individual identity that is commonplace in contemporary, secularized Western democracies would have been unimaginable for Wesley. Many of the functions that we now associate with the government (the registration of births, marriages, and deaths) were functions of the church. As Charles Taylor notes, in that period of history "baptism marked entry into the community" and "[c]onfirmation was a symbolic rite of entry into adulthood."³⁷ The church played a very different and significant social role in society during Wesley's time—in a sense it can be likened to some of the social functions certain governmental agencies fulfil in contemporary society. As such, it was not only a space of belonging that informed one's faith, it was necessary to belong to the church for one's social and political survival! This is no longer the case. As Charles Taylor rightly points out, there is scarcely a country on earth where one's primary identity and one's political being are wholly dependent upon the church. Religious belonging, indeed, religious belief, is now a matter of free choice; and political agency and identity are quite separate from the church—at least in the formal sense. There has quite simply been a shift "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."³⁸

Whereas in Wesley's time it was the church, and to some extent the state, that defined what it meant to be human, "modern liberal democracies establish themselves on the right of individuals to define for themselves what defines the human."³⁹ This has led to a crisis of identity since "a human being comes to be defined—paradoxically? incoherently?—by the right to self-definition."⁴⁰

The net result is that in contemporary society we decide who we are and to whom we belong. Without any external claim upon our lives, or any transcending frame of reference for who we are, we have witnessed

37. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 439, 520, 534.

38. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3.

39. Bauerschmidt, "Being Baptized," 251.

40. Bauerschmidt, "Being Baptized," 251.

significant identity struggles and painful misrecognitions. What does it mean to be human? Do all human persons have the same value, and if they do, how do we express this concretely in terms of human rights? Who has the right to decide whether someone is welcome or unwelcome in a country (as we've seen with the significant struggles around migration in Europe and the USA)? How do we deal with persons whose gender identity or sexual preference is expressed in ways that do not represent the historical or social norms of our society?

Francis Fukuyama discusses the consequences of these complex issues in his book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*.⁴¹ He suggests that the rise of populist, nationalist movements on the “right” of the political spectrum in the USA, Brazil, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden, as well as populist and activist movements on the “left,” such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, all reflect a “crisis of meaning” that is a result of misrecognition and a loss of true identity.⁴² We are people struggling to answer the questions, “Who am I?” and “To whom do I belong?”

We are haunted by a lack of true identity and a loss of a sense of belonging. This, in turn, has been complicated by the historical repositioning of the identity and role of Christianity and the church in many contemporary societies in which the Wesleyan tradition has taken root. Secularisation, and changes in the way in which the local congregation and the denomination relate to faith life, has had a profound effect on our understanding of baptism.⁴³ What is the church? Is membership of a local congregation or a specific Christian denomination necessary or important in contemporary Christian faith? If church membership is no longer socially important or theologically linked to Christian faith formation and discipleship, then what is the role and function of baptism as a means of grace that initiates entry into the church? In what sense is entry into the church, and the journey of belonging and formation that accompanies membership in the church, even necessary on the journey toward salvation of the individual and the eschatological intention of creation? These issues have led to baptism being “variously interpreted and often reduced to a ceremony of dedication”⁴⁴—a social ritual or rite

41. Fukuyama, *Identity*, 25–37.

42. Fukuyama, *Identity*, 25–37.

43. See for example, Taylor, *Secular Age*; Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*.

44. United Methodist Church, *By Water and the Spirit*, 2.

of passage in a nominally Christian culture in which the individual is dedicated to Christ, or socially associated with the Christian religion in some occidental sense, and only very loosely related to the church by means of membership.⁴⁵ However, baptism, understood in this sense, has very little to do with faith formation and the formation of Christian identity. Indeed, it has very little to do with how Wesley understood baptism in relation to salvation (soteriology), the church (ecclesiology), and God's intention for creation (eschatology).

Much of contemporary Christian thinking about baptism has thus become focused on the "individual and the spiritual rather than the corporate and the material."⁴⁶ We have, mistakenly, understood baptism to be only about the individual (and in the case of infant baptism, the individual's immediate family). Baptism is viewed as a social norm and a rite of passage at worst, and merely as a way for parents or believing individuals to publicly profess their Christian belief and identification with the Christian religion and the church. While this is not entirely wrong, it is also not entirely right as it offers a stunted and jaundiced version of biblical, historical, and Wesleyan baptismal theology. What of God's claim upon our lives? What of the community of the church to which we belong? What of God's will for all of creation?

Baptism a Sacrament of Belonging and Becoming

As has been shown, for the Wesleyan Christian, baptism is intrinsically linked to identity, namely through the sense of belonging and becoming. Who we are and who we are to be as baptized Christians is framed, in Wesleyan theological terms, by soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

Soteriologically, baptism marks the first response to God's prevenient grace extended toward us. What makes this so beautiful is that it is truly an act of undeserved and unmerited grace. Before we can prove anything about our worth, before we can do anything to make ourselves worthy or unworthy, before we can fully believe or understand, we are

45. It is not surprising that after the publication of the resource, *By Water and the Spirit* (1996), a workbook was released to be used by clergy and churches to study aspects of baptism and identity. See Felton, *By Water and the Spirit*.

46. Bauerschmidt, "Being Baptized," 253.

welcomed and chosen by God.⁴⁷ It is God who initiates salvation and we who respond to this gracious gift of God.

This is to be held in tension with the ecclesiological emphasis, namely, the life of faith that will develop within the church and the family. Greville Lewis sums up the relationship between “prevenient grace,” “justifying grace,” and “sanctifying grace” beautifully when he says, “Baptism therefore proclaims that the child is the *inheritor* of God’s promises in the Gospel’ the later decision, conversion, and reception into full church membership signify that he [*sic*] now *claims* his inheritance.”⁴⁸ The provision of an inheritance is God’s gracious gift in Christ. The claiming of the inheritance is framed within a dual responsibility. First, it is the responsibility of the Christian community (which includes the parents and family of the baptized person), whose task it is to “so maintain the Church’s life of worship and service that *they* [the baptized persons] may grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁴⁹ The church is the community of belonging in which and through which the baptized learn who they are to become.

Second, it is the responsibility of the baptized person to respond to God’s justifying and sanctifying grace in and through the means of grace, thereby truly belonging to Christ and becoming the person they have been created to be. As a member of the church we learn to become who we truly are. Stanley Hauerwas famously said, “the first task of the church is not to make the world just, but to make the world the world.”⁵⁰ Hauerwas describes the life of the disciples as “growing into your baptism,” saying “when Christians live into their baptism they cannot help but be a people of virtue and, for that reason, possessed by joy.”⁵¹ What Hauerwas takes from Wesley is the understanding that baptism gives both the promise of salvation and also the responsibility of church discipline, indeed Christian discipleship within the community of the church.

As noted earlier, Wesley differed from some of his contemporaries in the Anglican theological tradition in that he distrusted those who viewed baptism as sufficient for salvation while they continued to live lives that lacked piety, holiness, and justice. It was the church that formed

47. Wesley, “Letter to Dr. Warburton,” 357.

48. Lewis, *Approach to Christian Doctrine*, 182, emphasis in the original text.

49. Methodist Church, *Methodist Worship Book*, 94.

50. Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, xi.

51. Hauerwas, *Character of Virtue*.

the baptized person, first into a believer, and then into a disciple. Wesley understood baptism to be a “covenant relationship with God and the expectation that a life full of love of God would issue forth in works of piety and mercy.”⁵² For Wesley, belonging to the church had spiritual consequences, but also social and political consequences. For example, he was opposed to slavery for, among other reasons, the belief that by baptism Christians could not view the bodies of other Christians as “property” since they were now members of the same family.⁵³ Like Wesley, Hauerwas also believes that baptism should have the authority to “reconfigure” all other loyalties and calls upon our person and identity—if we belong to Christ, we are to be Christian.⁵⁴ In Wesley’s ecclesiology this link is most clearly expressed in his linking of baptism, church membership, and the renewal of our covenant with God. He thus encouraged the original Methodists to continually observe a covenant renewal service, which most often took place at the start of each new calendar year. The service was first introduced by John Wesley in 1755, serving as an opportunity for a recommitment of one’s life to Christ and Christ’s church, and through that to the responsibilities and tasks of everyday life. It is a remarkable expression of identity and the life that should flow from being in Christ. The Covenant promise begins with the words, “I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure.”⁵⁵

Here is seen radical departure from forms of individualism, self-determination, and self-identification common in contemporary Western societies. The early Methodist emphasis on belonging, in differing forms, was so central to the formation of a new identity. From the Society Meeting to the Class Meeting and the Band Meeting, Wesley established a system for discipleship where each performed an essential task in the formation of true Christian identity—a life that exemplified the character and virtues of Christian faith. D. Michael Henderson suggests that in the worshiping congregation (the Society), Christian faith was taught and witnessed in a “cognitive mode.”⁵⁶ The Class Meeting sought to engage the “behavioural mode,” by instilling practices of accountability, service, and

52. Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 239.

53. Hauerwas, *Work of Theology*, 204.

54. Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 268.

55. Methodist Church, *Methodist Worship Book*, 288.

56. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 83.

discipline in the life of the individual and the community.⁵⁷ Finally, the Band sought to engage the “affective” aspects of the life of faith through prayer, worship, confession, and care.⁵⁸ What Wesley understood is that belonging to the church is intended to form one into the kind of person that God has created one to be in order to live in such a way as to shape society according to the values of God’s kingdom. Here we see, once again, how soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology are intricately linked in Wesleyan baptismal theology.

Such a sense of belonging and becoming serves not only to form Christian identity in relation to who God has created persons to be, it also counteracts what Slavoj Žižek identifies as the “nerve centre of liberal ideology,” which sustains the destructive myth of the individual “psychological subject” finding fulfilment and flourishing in isolation from other persons and creation.⁵⁹ Within the sacrament of baptism, the human person is not a “self-enclosed private domain,” rather she or he “is something shared because [she or he] is something surrendered to the Spirit of God.”⁶⁰ The United Methodist Church’s baptismal liturgy states it as follows, “In your baptism, the word of Scripture is fulfilled: ‘We love, because God first loved us.’”⁶¹ In this sense, the baptized person is invited into the story of Christ and Christ’s work in history and creation. Baptism into the church opens us up to becoming who God has made us to be so we can work alongside Christ to help the world to become what it is created to be. One is invited into the community of church in order to go out in the world to work alongside God in the achievement of the *missio Dei*. As Louis-Marie Chauvet reflects:

The difference inscribed on the body of every person through Christian initiation is so important that, far from imprisoning one into a clan or cultural group, as some other rites of initiation do, it opens onto the universal: by their baptism, Christians do not become members of a ghetto, but sisters and brothers of all humans in Jesus Christ.⁶²

57. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 93.

58. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 112.

59. Žižek, *On Belief*, 116.

60. Bauerschmidt, “Being Baptized,” 254.

61. Methodist Church, *Methodist Worship Book*, 93.

62. Chauvet, *Sacraments*, 111.

So, in this final sense, baptism for the Wesleyan Christian is not only about salvation—belonging to and growing in the body of Christ—it is also about becoming. Baptized persons become what they were created to be. Together with other baptized persons in the church and the world, they live toward the eschatological intention of God’s loving act of creation. In John Wesley’s soteriology, this is the aim of the Christian life and the purpose of religion; indeed, the very aim for which God “birthed” the Methodists, namely Christian Perfection.⁶³ It is described as follows:

The ultimate goal in life . . . was the fullest possible love of God and neighbor—the restoration of the image of Christ in the life of every believer. This restoration is a journey birthed by grace, nurtured by grace, and reaching its ultimate goal through grace: Christian perfection.⁶⁴

When baptism is considered through the theological lens of Methodist soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, it takes on a rich, deep, and textured meaning. It is not only a rite of passage, a cultural practice, or a formulaic requirement for membership of the church. Rather, it is a means of grace by which we discover to whom we belong and learn to become who God has created us to be. In doing so, we learn to live in the world as members of Christ’s body, participating with Christ in the renewal and healing of the world toward God’s perfect and intended will.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that we are facing a crisis of identity in contemporary society. We struggle to answer the questions “Who am I?” and “To whom do I belong?” The resources of liberal democracy and Western individualism have proven to be inadequate in providing the necessary resources to help us to become who we are intended to be. A further consequence has been the erosion of our understanding of the identity and purpose of the Christian church. While there is no single, essential form of church that can adequately address the needs of women and men through history or across the many varied contexts of contemporary society, this chapter has proposed that a reacquaintance with John Wesley’s understanding baptism, in both objective and subjective terms, could

63. cf., Wesley, *Plain Account*, 14; Wesley in Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today*, 238; Campbell, “The ‘Way of Salvation,’” 5.

64. Wesley, *Plain Account*, 13.

help us discover where we belong and who we are to become. While we may need to consider some variety in contemporary approaches to baptismal liturgy and practice, we should hold to the central Wesleyan baptismal focus on soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

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