

THE IMPACT OF OBRAS DE WESLEY IN THE HISPANIC WORLD¹

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The **Global** Impact of Wesley is indeed a very broad subject. We have selected a piece of the globe by looking at the Hispanic world and the availability of the Works of Wesley. Treatment of that smaller scope still requires vulnerable generalizations. [An academic colleague used to say: “he who generalizes, generally lies.”] Moreover, since the Works of Wesley have existed in Spanish less than two years, this presentation can only conjecture what might be the future impact of OBRAS DE WESLEY in the Hispanic world. Fortunately, hopes and prognostications cannot be held to the same standards of scholarly accuracy as reviewing and evaluating past history!

A first thesis: In the 20th C. the impact of Wesley in Latin America has been very significant, but largely incognito. In retrospect, some causes for that kind of influence are fairly clear.

1. Christianity arrived in South America under the banners of Spanish and Portuguese conquest. The Latin expression of Roman Catholicism was both the beneficiary of and the apologist for that military, political, religious, economic and social imperialism. Under Spanish and Portuguese colonial rule, the indigenous religious rites were partially obliterated, grudgingly tolerated, and sometimes allowed to be practiced before or after the Latin mass, but always under

¹Presented by L. Elbert Wethington, President, Wesley Heritage Foundation.

the hegemony of the Catholic hierarchy. Evangelical mission work in the Spanish language began in Latin America in the last four decades of the 19th C., but Protestant denominations did not show much growth until the 20th C.

2. Latin America has never experienced the Protestant Reformation nor the Wesleyan revival which impacted England and the United States of America in the first century of its existence. Evangelical missionaries from North America faced a new challenge in Latin America which they had not experienced in non-Christian countries. And the new evangelical churches which were planted are still struggling with their own identity, although some, e.g. Pentecostal churches, have experienced phenomenal growth in numbers. Even those converted to evangelical Christianity tended to experience their new faith through an apperceptive mass formed predominantly by Roman Catholicism. In Latin America there were no spiritual “great awakenings” in the 19th C., and the “industrial revolution” didn’t arrive until the 20th C. There were only occasional and minor expressions of significant theological/ethical change in the Catholic leadership until Vatican II (1961-63) “opened the windows” to Christian ecumenism and authorized ecclesiastical engagement with the urgent human issues in the world community. (Again, we apologize for “painting with a broad brush.”) According to Dr. John Mackay, in the early decades of the 20th C. many missionary statesmen alleged that Protestantism “is utterly foreign to the Latin spirit, and for that reason can never become a natural expression of the religious life nor a creative element in the cultural development of a Latin people.”² Of course, that assessment has been largely refuted by several generations of evangelical experience and the impact of secular cultures.

² John A. Mackay, *THE OTHER SPANISH CHRIST*, (New York: McMillan, 1933), 259.

3. The new churches which split off from “traditional” or main stream Methodism in the USA perpetuated through each of its missions the distinctive emphasis or issue which had been the source of the new Wesleyan denominations, e.g. holiness, clergy dominated authority, social ministries, and varieties of pentecostalism, some of them without a strong sense of obligation to represent the “whole Wesley” in dialogue with the indigenous and Latin cultures. Traditional Methodism had established itself as a major denomination in the USA and acculturated itself without a strong emphasis upon the distinctive heritage, doctrines and disciplines of Wesley. Early 19th C. Methodists had suffered divisions over doctrines and polity which gave birth to many new Wesleyan denominations. Mainline Methodism was finding its identity by minimizing doctrinal and organizational issues and by its role increasingly in the 20th C. in promoting faith at work in the world and cultivating ecumenical relations. Certainly these are biblical and Wesleyan emphases. But for a century (1850 to 1950) Wesley’s own theology and spirituality were slighted. Therefore, as one might expect, “mainstream” Methodist missions in Latin America tended to follow the “home” pattern. Their missions appealed to the small middle class in Latin America through effective ministries of high quality education, social services, and formal worship. Dr. Justo Gonzalez wrote: “in many of our countries schools were founded for commercial courses, but not an equal impact on evangelism of the country or in the beliefs of Methodism.”³ When the mission churches became autonomous they were often without the stewardship base for continued financing of expensive institutions, buildings and lands. But more

³Justo L. Gonzalez, JUAN WESLEY: Herencia y Promesa (San Juan, PR: Publicaciones Puertorequenas, 1998), 6.

important for this thesis, the mission churches were largely without an acquaintance with John Wesley himself and without a clear identity as

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Methodists, and therefore had a strong tendency toward division.

4. The Latin American direct descendants of the “main stream” North American churches are a minority in the Wesleyan family of churches. If only one-half of “the 75 million evangelicals in Latin America” have roots in Wesley, the majority of those are in the Holiness and Pentecostal churches.⁴ While the relatively small middle class responded to traditional Methodism, the marginal and poorer class were more attracted to the Holiness and Pentecostal expressions of Wesleyanism. Thus Professor Gonzalez writes that today “there are millions of persons who, many without knowing it, are spiritual heirs of Wesley and the Methodist movement of the 18th C.”⁵ Their inspired spiritual leaders emphasized the Wesleyan doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit to sanctify those who are willing to receive the transforming power of God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Holiness and Pentecostal churches differ from each other in the relative emphasis they put upon the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, such as sanctification, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, and divine healing. But a common element is their minimal emphasis upon formal education and “uniting the two so long divided, knowledge and vital piety.” Clearly the “whole Wesley” is not being faithfully taught and “traditioned” by **either** “mainline Methodists” or the Holiness and Pentecostal churches. The question: Will OBRAS DE WESLEY help restore the missing link and become a major resource and common authority for Wesleyan doctrine and

⁴Mortimer Arias, “El Rostro Wesleyano de Americana Latina Y El Caribe,” Montevideo: unpublished paper, 1999, 7-9.

⁵Gonzalez, *op.cit.*, 10.

practice among the Hispanic churches of the expanding Wesleyan family?

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Why WESLEY IN SPANISH?

We find no evidence that John Wesley ever considered having his Works translated and published in Spanish. But, according to entries in his Journals and Diaries, he did have a strong personal desire to learn Spanish for two special reasons: 1) to communicate the Gospel to Sephardic Jews, Spanish traders, and mestizos when he was a missionary in the colony of Georgia; and 2) to read the Spanish mystics, especially Miguel de Molinos and Gregorio Lopez, who are highly commended by Wesley, along with the French Archbishop Fenelon, as spiritual mentors in the pure love/perfect holiness which can be experienced as a gift through uninterrupted contemplation of God (HOLY LOVE). But such interests of Wesley were generally not known by members of the Wesleyan family of churches in Latin America. Neither should we be surprised there are no widely recognized scholars in Wesley's theology and spirituality among the Hispanic evangelical churches. Some highly esteemed evangelical Latino (Hispanic and Portuguese) educators and ecumenical leaders have distinguished themselves in the 20th C. But none have been recognized as prominent Wesley scholars and promoters of Wesley Studies among Latinos. This condition among the Latin American evangelical churches obviously reflects the lukewarm interest in Wesley in the western hemisphere, at least until about 1960 when the academic discipline of Wesley Studies and the Bicentennial Edition of The Works of Wesley were given birth at Duke University by Divinity School Dean Robert E. Cushman and Dr. Frank Baker, the English Methodist bibliographer of Wesley's Works. English readers have had no excuse for not knowing Wesley. But Hispanics have been virtually deprived of the Works of Wesley for the past

200 years. Yet, the Spanish language, we are told, is spoken by more people in the western hemisphere than English.

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One century ago there was an effort to make some of Wesley's sermons available in Spanish. The 52 Standard Sermons of Wesley were translated by the Rev. Primitivo Rodriguez, of Mexico, and published, 1891-92, in 2 small volumes by the Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in Nashville, TN. Only a few rare copies of these have been identified in Latin America in recent years. Those Sermons of Wesley in Spanish were not reprinted until the Nazarene Publishing House requested permission and was given the copyright; that reprint in 1983-84 was distributed largely among Hispanic pastors and students of the Church of the Nazarene in the USA and Latin America, and are now out of print.

Enter OBRAS DE WESLEY

The project to produce the major Works of Wesley in Spanish began in 1989 with a simple request for assistance in building the resources of a theological seminary library in Peru, response to which exposed the appalling absence of Wesley's writings in Spanish. Further inquiry disclosed that many evangelical church leaders had long been aware of this vacuum. Increasingly this was considered an urgent need because they were suffering badly from the lack of Wesleyan identity and increasing divisions in their churches. Yet, nothing was being done to correct the situation because translating and publishing LAS OBRAS DE WESLEY "was not commercially profitable." Repeatedly the cry was heard from Hispanic evangelical leadership: "What we need is **Wesley himself** preaching the Gospel and teaching the Methodist discipline."

As a modest effort to consider that neglected need, The Wesley Heritage Foundation, Inc.

was chartered in August 1990. An international design team of Hispanic and Anglo scholars and church administrators met in October 1990. They came out with a project to produce a Spanish text and publish in 14 volumes the major Works of Wesley in just the same scholarly form Wesley had

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published them. Non-scholarly options, topical selections, and other halfway measures were rejected. The design team strongly affirmed that the best way for persons in Latin America to know John

Wesley is to “let Wesley speak for himself.” The intention was both scholarly and missionary, a rejection of the premise that those two are mutually exclusive.. OBRAS DE WESLEY was being proposed not only as a means of helping Methodists to know their own identity, but as an instrument of the Holy Spirit for the renewal and unity of the whole Body of Christ, as Wesley himself would have wanted it to be. The Wesley Heritage Foundation adopted that design. Thus began a ten-year antiphonal liturgy of woes and joys. After attempting several options which were dead-end, the Wesley Heritage Foundation made an awesome decision whether to drop the whole project or assume full responsibility for its completion. Some of us were convinced it was truly Providential when a contract for General Editor was signed with Dr. Justo L. Gonzalez, the preeminent Hispanic church historian, theologian, and prolific author, along with 17 other translators. By August 1996, volumes 1-4 were published, and all 14 volumes of OBRAS DE WESLEY were published by October 1998 by the grace of God.

What were THE INITIAL RESPONSES?

On August 9, 1996 the first four volumes of OBRAS DE WESLEY were introduced to the World Methodist Council, meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, at the seminar on “Wesley, Our Heritage, and the Global Holiness/Pentecostal Movement.” Dr. Mortimer Arias, Bishop Emeritus

of the Methodist Church in Bolivia, made this statement:

“The publishing in Spanish of The Works of Wesley in 14 volumes is a major undertaking without parallel in the history of Methodist publishing around the non-English speaking world. We can be sure that the availability in Spanish of the Wesley Works will respond to

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the growing demand for identity and renewal of life and mission of the churches of ‘The people called Methodist’ in the whole hemisphere.

And we can hope that for the next century Wesley may become a fertile source of inspiration, doctrinal formation, and pastoral orientation for pastors, lay leaders, students, teachers and academic researchers of the always expanding Wesleyan family, including forms of Methodism as well as Holiness and Pentecostal churches, especially in Latin America.

We needed a visionary venture like this, we are grateful for it, and we should commit ourselves to make these works accessible for reading and study all over the hemisphere and the Spanish speaking world.”

In his cycle of 6 lectures in San Juan, Puerto Rico in October 1997, Dr. Gonzalez asked the question: “Por que Wesley en espanol?” His reply: “the answer is clear! Because today in Latin America, and among the Spanish-speaking people in the USA, there are millions of spiritual sons and daughters of John Wesley. And because the impact of Wesley among us has been such that we do not understand him nor do we understand our own selves.”⁶ In April 1999 a third-generation Methodist and lay pastor in Peru said to us with uncontrollable joy: “At last I have found my own identity in Juan Wesley.” A District Superintendent said: “They [OBRAS] are the

⁶Gonzalez, *op.cit.*, 11.

best gift of the century for us.” And Bishop Emeritus in Chile, Dr. Raimundo Valenzuela, wrote: “So many persons are saying they [OBRAS] have helped us find our true identity as Methodists.” The initial impact indicates that these resources of the Gospel in Spanish are meeting at least one of the urgent needs, identity. In February 2000 the oral report came that Bishop Pereira had given Cuba’s President Fidel Castro a volume of OBRAS, and a few weeks later he was asked how he liked

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reading Wesley, and his reply was: “Now I understand why Methodists care so much about the poor. I’m going to read some more.” We can safely predict that the reasons for attraction to OBRAS DE WESLEY will vary.

OBRAS DE WESLEY: A New Ingredient.

Will OBRAS be a catalyst for encounter, dialogue, and/or an agent of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit for the renewal and unity of the Church as the Body of Christ in the world? What will be the impact? In truth, we have some foreboding mixed with a deeper confidence.

Many of these diverse Wesleyan churches have become aware they are heirs of Wesley. But what will happen when they begin to recognize that their denominational founders/leaders have been selective in their espousal of John Wesley, the Oxford don, Fellow of Lincoln College, the great Revivalist? Even with the amazing signs of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit Wesleyan spiritual leaders have brought forth new denominations giving special emphasis to different aspects of John Wesley’s Methodism. Certain other emphases are neglected. Will the study of OBRAS help to restore the “whole Wesley” or will it prompt more controversy and new denominations?

Dr. Mortimer Arias cites the report of the Methodist Bishop of Sao Paulo, Brasil who named

15 separate denominations in Brasil which acknowledge their major roots in Wesley.⁷ The largest denominations and major evangelical influence, of course, are the Pentecostals. Bishop Arias also quotes the Bishop of the very large Iglesia Metodista Pentecostal de Chile, who affirms: “Our standards are the Sermons of Wesley.” Another Pentecostal bishop on the same occasion affirmed: “Wesley is our beloved grandfather, and we are his grandchildren, and we are able to acknowledge with gratitude to our fathers and sons that we will be their mediators.” Dr. Arias reviews the **impact**

⁷Mortimer Arias, *op.cit.* 3.

of Pentecostalism on the traditional formality of Methodist worship and the demands for a more spontaneous, celebrating worship, with “more corporal and emotional liberty.”⁸ Added to that were some Latino and Caribbean rites and a major emphasis upon holiness, prayers for the sick, etc. Some Methodists began to speak about “the pentecostalization of Methodism.” There has been an increasing recognition that Wesleyan “roots” have become entangled with other traditions. Without acquaintance with objective norms of doctrine and tradition, the third or fourth generation begins to be confused about its own identity. Speaking in Chile to the leadership of the large Wesleyan family of churches, Mortimer Arias extended an irenic appeal to their unity: “together we are able to rediscover Wesley.”

The Possible Impact of OBRAS DE WESLEY.

If renewal and unity among the Wesleyan family of churches may involve “rediscovering” the essential or “whole Wesley,” should we begin to identify and address the agenda or simply wait for the interactions to confront us with the issues? Could we surmise that one of the greatest challenges of introducing Wesley himself is how “the essential Wesley” will be lifted out of his 18th C. context, pruned and replanted in 21st C. Latin America? Some Methodists have rejected Wesley because he did not project in his own 18th C. a model of social ethics for the 21st C. Dare we suggest that no Wesley scholar is likely to develop a Wesleyan social ethics for the 21st C. unless it is deeply rooted in John Wesley’s essential theology. We cannot forget how the Spirit-filled dynamics of the Methodist revival kept Wesley’s theology geared to the practical level of guiding, nurturing, and transmitting its mission, a lively reality which should be appealing to Latin America. We who are working “double-time” to distribute OBRAS DE WESLEY may be forced to

⁸Arias, *op.cit.*, 3.

acknowledge that a widespread, intensive study, research, writing, seminars, and publishing in Wesley Studies may occur only as a **result of a revival** of the Christian faith rather than a contributing cause of the revival. Certainly any claim to find in OBRAS a “user friendly” theology and liturgy will be a misreading of Wesley. On the other hand, allowing Wesley to focus our hearts and minds upon the essentials of the Gospel may open our spirits to the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit.

Will Latinos find in Wesley the essentials of the Gospel needed for revival? Will personal and congregational acquaintance with Juan Wesley attract persons to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, open hearts and minds to the real presence of the Holy Spirit, prepare them for repentance and receiving Divine reconciliation, and the gift of holiness with its perfect love of God and neighbor? What model of social ethics vital to Latin America can grow out of Wesley’s doctrine of holiness and responsible discipleship? How may OBRAS DE WESLEY serve to familiarize the Wesleyan family of churches with its roots and wholeness, and accept the Christ-given unity for the Wesleyan Hispanic denominations and embrace the other evangelical denominations as well? In continuing obedience to the Holy Spirit would they not find themselves harmonizing also with the Roman Catholic fellowship? (“If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand” was written to Roman Catholics in Ireland.) Wesley’s conviction was that “it was for this purpose [preaching holiness] that God raised up the people called Methodists.” Holiness is a biblical and catholic doctrine. Does Latino culture tend to reject the doctrine of sanctification any more than North American capitalist society? Did not Wesley despise dissimulation in human relations as blatant disregard for the presence of God who knows every heart? Is not original sin a universal condition which requires radical healing, “a new birth from above,” as Wesley insisted? Can Wesley’s doctrines and spiritual

discipline contribute to a new era for the wholeness of the Gospel and the Church, and invite a united affirmation of evangelical Grace and catholic Holiness, the **means** and the **substance** of salvation? What a challenge!!

Some may reply: what more do people need for revival than the Bible and the Presence of the Holy Spirit? And we quickly agree those two are essential. Yet, can we forget that most of the great “watershed” type of revivals and reformations in the history of the Christian church have been associated with Christ-called persons who had personally experienced new enlightenment in God’s Word through the writings of some other disciple of Christ? Martin Luther’s study of St. Paul, or John Wesley’s hearing one read from Luther’s Preface to his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans? Reading Wesley was my own personal “Aldersgate.” Might reading the Works of Wesley become an Aldersgate experience for the new Hispanic leaders of a surprisingly **new pattern** of Christian reformation radically affecting all Latin America, an event which cannot be pre-designed by human ingenuity? Such an early 21st C. “awakening” in Latin America may even spread northward to awaken Anglo America to the power of the Gospel to transform lives inwardly and outwardly according to the Gospel/catholic doctrine of the divine gift of holiness as John Wesley preached and taught it. The crucial and most important question is: with, or in spite of, the Wesleyan, the Reformed, the Lutheran or the Roman Catholic traditions, will the living Christ be rediscovered in Latin America so as to produce “a new creation” of the whole Body of Christ, *al la gloria de Dios*?

While the Resurrection Event assures us that God has defeated the powers of evil and the Kingdom of God is most surely established, yet we must contend with the threatening forces of

evil which have not yet surrendered. What chance does the Wesleyan renewal of the doctrine of “the

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fullness of faith,” holiness, have against the overpowering, increasingly worldwide, secular confidence that we humans are able to “get along O.K. without God, thank you”? Are Wesleyans able, “against the odds,” to continue our witness that “with God all things are possible?” Might LAS OBRAS DE WESLEY, in particular his teachings of “accountable discipleship,” serve to sharpen the issue between the Gospel and the world, especially the economy of material lust, which both Karl Marx (socialism) and Adam Smith (capitalism) agreed controls everything else? If, as John Wesley taught, authentic holiness is “inward and outward,” is always a “faith working by love,” and cannot be solitary, how will disciples of Christ, living in the Reign of God, help to shape the future agenda for the world? John Wesley does not allow us to capitulate to the powers of darkness, while we simply pray and piously wait for the end of the world.

Finally, in our anticipation of the future impact of Wesleyanism we must not allow our hopes, apprehensions, and forecasts to leave the impression that we can set limits upon the surprising work of the Holy Spirit. “The wind blows where it will,” and we are not able to understand it or preview its course. Wesleyans believe above all else in the primacy of Grace: it is God whose grace initiates, sustains, and fulfills. Salvation is “the entire work of God.” Ours is a faith-judgment; therefore, we trust God who produces whatever fruit God wills. Yet God works sometimes through humble, faithful servants, if we are willing; and sometimes God works in spite of human rebellion.

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