

GRATITUDE AND REFLECTIONS:  
A Summary of the Bristol Consultation on *Las Obras de Wesley*

By Dr. L. Elbert Wethington

In faithfulness to John and Charles Wesley's dictum and prayer, "Let us unite the two so long divided, knowledge and vital piety," the Global Consultation on the Impact of OBRAS DE WESLEY was held in Bristol, England, July 14-19, 2001. This was a "mission" venture in scholarship and Christian nurture. It was a time of celebration and gratitude for the availability of these resources of the Gospel in the Spanish language, OBRAS DE WESLEY, in 14 volumes.

After being deprived of Wesley's Works for more than 250 years, this gathering, in concert with thousands throughout the Spanish-speaking world, confirmed the urgent need among Hispanics for "Wesley himself" in their mother tongue. By the Grace of God, the translation and the publication of OBRAS DE WESLEY was accomplished in September 1998 by the Wesley Heritage Foundation, Inc., by means of contracts with the General Editor Justo L. Gonzalez and 17 translators, and the Providence House Publishers. Now it was time to review and look to the future.

This gathering of approximately 30 Spanish-speaking scholars and church leaders, with 8 or 10 Anglo colleagues, was coordinated and graciously hosted by Daniel and Thelma Flores, the Directors of the Charles Wesley Study Centre in Bristol. Comfortable housing, delicious meals, and meeting spaces were provided at Trinity College. These young and middle-aged leaders of Wesleyan churches in Hispanic countries were introduced to the inspiring "birthplace" and one of the most important centers of the Methodist revival by "walking" where John and Charles witnessed. The preserved "New Room"/Wesley's Chapel on Horse Fair and Haymarket, as well as Charles Wesley's house, became favorite haunts for re-living the excitement of the revival. Especially for those who had not previously visited "Wesley places" in England it was an exhilarating experience of "touching their roots" and confirming their commitment to the Wesley heritage of spirituality and thought. What they had previously known about the Methodist tradition assumed a new reality and generated enthusiasm for sharing more faithfully the Gospel according to John and Charles Wesley.

Worship services were a re-traditioning of the Wesley revival and a celebration of the availability of Wesley's Works in Spanish. To the amazement of some of us Anglos, in the closing Eucharist, during the "Great Thanksgiving" the 14 vols. of OBRAS DE WESLEY were taken from the rostrum and placed on the floor, as if a bonfire, in the center of the circle of singing and dancing worshippers-- in jubilant Latino style! A common human gift was offered to be consecrated by the real Presence of the Resurrected Lord, and received again with thanks to be taken into the world "in the strength of your Spirit to give ourselves for others."

This venture in Bristol appears to have been fully justified; the consequent benefits can be measured only by the fruitfulness of this planting. We all departed filled with gratitude and hope. This Consultation was sponsored and funded by the General Board of Global Ministries in New York, which also has recently funded a subsidized distribution of almost 900 sets of OBRAS for pastors and libraries among autonomous Methodist Churches in Latin America.

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My REFLECTIONS focus on the major topics of the Treatises of John Wesley chosen for examination during the Global Consultation on the Impact of OBRAS DE WESLEY. The group discussions were open and candid, without the fashionable scholarly defensive rhetoric. My reflections will follow the same spirit. (Remember how John Wesley hated dissimulation!) The four topics selected dealt with "Origins of Power," "Lisbon Earthquake," "Food Shortage," and "Slavery." With the possible exception of the problem of "theodicy" reflected in his treatment of such natural disasters as earthquakes, Wesley demonstrates remarkable understanding of political science, economics, and human rights, the so-called social sciences. But, when I saw these topics featured in the program, my first reaction was that this selection reflects a strong interest in John Wesley's social ethics. That seems somewhat natural since he was not only a revivalist and spiritual nurturist (discipleship), but almost revolutionary in his courageous concern for human suffering and social justice.

My impression is that in the short 275 years history of Methodism students of that tradition have been more inclined to focus first on Wesley's doctrine and discipline rather than social ethics— and sometimes sadly finding division among themselves, even disagreement

about the central doctrine of God's love. "Mainline" American Methodism in the 20<sup>th</sup> C. reacted to theological divisions by becoming the Protestant leader of the "social gospel" movement and ecumenical unity, but often at the expense of doctrinal dialogue in love. "Mission descendants" have tended to reflect the sentiments of their mentors. Some of the doctrines which Wesley considered "essential," such as original sin, new birth, and holiness, he firmly believed were also catholic-tradition-orthodox. The sects that split off from mainstream Methodism were left to accentuate, or, some critics said "distort," those central Wesleyan doctrines which they thought were being neglected. But Methodists thought it was "nicer" to be politely non-controversial, or "love" is better than "truth," although the Gospel seems to affirm they are inseparable.

My second reaction to the appearance of a special attraction to social ethics in the program was to wonder if this reflected a residue of the fading "liberation theology" which assumed that certain Christian social principles could be best rationalized and practiced if set in the context of a Marxist or other non-Christian ideological analysis of society. This might be an honest alternative to a capitalist ideological analysis which some Christian ethicists have used. Philosophers of different world views have argued that dialectical materialism (Marxist socialism) and competitive enterprise (Adam Smith capitalism) are both rooted in the presupposition that all human beings are motivated primarily by personal, often material, self-interest, and the only cure is to find a system to control it. And Christian theologians agree that is a description of "original sin," or separation from God. The question arises which offers a better foundation for building a Christian social ethics, a doctrine of distorted human nature (sin) or the affirmation of the values of the Kingdom of God, or the two in tension? Or, back to the earlier question: is this apparent interest in beginning with social ethics a yearning to find a more authentically Christian alternative social ethics— which I prefer to think-- than what some Methodists had proposed as an eclectic theory for correcting the injustices in society?

At this point, perhaps I should disclose, if it is not already evident, that my reflections tend to flow from a systematic theologian's presupposition that an authentic Christian social ethics must arise out of essential Christian doctrines. The assumption is that it does not matter so much where one begins to take hold of an issue if one continues to pursue the truth by searching honestly all aspects of the issue in the light of the grace and truth given in Christ. The discipline of systematic theology requires continuously testing the consistency of each doctrine with every other essential doctrine of Christian faith so as to establish the coherence and integral wholeness of our understanding of the Divine Self-disclosure. One cannot make a personal choice between theology and ethics. Rather, some of us are convinced that we cannot develop in the 21<sup>st</sup> C. an authentic

Christian social ethics, Wesleyan or other, without it being solidly grounded in essential Christian doctrine. Pardon me, if you feel the need--, but I do believe that the most authentic expression of Christian theology, at least since the early Church Fathers, is given in the Works of John Wesley. Yes, he did not write a magnum opus in systematic theology; but in his personal discipleship, his ministry with others, and in all his writings he presupposed and faithfully reflected an orthodox systematic theology, with Grace as the central, integrating principle. He directed Methodists preachers and laity to the Holy Scriptures first, but as more specific standards, the Creeds of the early Church, the 39 Articles and the standard Homilies. As I have written elsewhere, "no Wesleyan scholar is likely to develop a Wesleyan social ethics for the 21<sup>st</sup> C. unless it is deeply rooted in John Wesley's essential theology."

One final observation about the group discussions of the social issues being studied is that when the discussion began by focusing on Wesley's treatment of the social issues the groups found themselves almost invariably being led back to a deeper engagement with the theology behind Wesley's active and courageous social action.

Finally, I will summarize an extemporaneous statement which I was requested to make about the Wesley Heritage Foundation in the closing general session of the Consultation:

1. "What should we do following this gathering?" was the question raised in the preceding session. Some participants suggested that we have another similar gathering, or even a series of them. This was obviously a strong testimony to the values just experienced.

My response to that was first an expression of deep gratitude to the General Board of Global Ministries for sponsoring this Consultation in Bristol. My personal view is that we are not likely to duplicate what we have just experienced; at least, we should not depend upon it. But we can **build** upon it, by: a) returning home, sharing our enthusiasm for Wesley Studies as an instrument of the Holy Spirit, and (b) encouraging others in our own countries to engage in serious study, research and writing about Wesley thought, spirituality, and stewardship of the Gospel. Pass the flaming torch!

2. Phase 1, translation and publication, of the Wesley Heritage Project has been completed. Phase 2, distribution of complete sets of OBRAS DE WESLEY, continues. We are distributing among all churches with roots in Wesley as members of the Wesley family of churches, and rightful/equal heirs of this heritage. This includes the huge Pentecostal Churches in Latin America. These Wesleyan sisters and brothers are increasingly turning to theological education. For the coming year, the greatest efforts of WHF

will be given to developing ways and means of distributing large numbers of sets of OBRAS among these pastors and laity. We are greatly blessed to have as one of the participants in this Consultation a Pentecostal Pastor/Professor, Dr. Dean Helland, who served 15 years developing a theological institute for Pentecostal pastors and laity in Chile. Dr. Helland has remarkable gifts for helping us Methodists to understand and claim joyfully our Pentecostal brothers and sisters.

3. Phase 3 of the Wesley Heritage Project is the promotion of Wesley Studies among Hispanics. This should be a new frontier in the development of distinctive Latin American interpretations of Wesley's theology and ministry. Are there particular aspects of Wesley's theology and ministry which are difficult for Latin American Christians? What new ingredients would Wesley's ministry bring to Latin American society, etc. The Internet provides a wonderful, inexpensive means of sharing drafts of research papers, outlines of books, study guides, exchanges of courses of study, etc. Theological dialogues and consultations on Church unity could be supported in each country, as well as workshops on various aspects of ministry. Funding from The Wesley Heritage Endowment will be available for supporting publications and certain other kinds of projects. Inquiries are welcome: Wesley Heritage Foundation, Inc., 4309 Sunny Court, Durham, NC 27705, or e-mail: [leweth@earthlink.net](mailto:leweth@earthlink.net)/ or [wethmw@mindspring.com](mailto:wethmw@mindspring.com)/

"Fraternally yours for the Grace and Truth of Christ in every heart and action, Elbert"