



The World is *Not* My Parish: Toward a Post-Colonial View of Christian Witness

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Abstract: One of John Wesley's famous quotes, "The world is my parish" is often used to support international missions in Methodism. However, the original intent of the quote was a way for Wesley to justify his irregular practices of preaching in local parishes where he was not the priest in charge. Drawing on research in postcolonial studies in theology and biblical studies, the paper provides a critique of Wesley's view of mission. It also provides the following avenues of Christian practice toward a postcolonial form of Christian witness: Re-membering Christ's body, table fellowship (hospitality), ecumenical engagement, and storytelling.

Keywords: Wesley theology • postcolonialism • christian practice • mission • evangelism

The World is My Parish

One of John Wesley's famous quotes, "The world is my parish," is often used to support international missions in Methodism. In a blog post by David Scott, he indicates that Wesley's phrase is adapted from, "I look upon all the world as my parish." Wesley's quote continues by saying, "Thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation."¹ Scott's blog and statement, "the world is *not* my parish", was the inspiration for my paper. I build on his idea by developing a post-colonial view of Christian witness.

One would think that Wesley's phrase came after the second half of his ministry, after he had societies and preaching houses. However, the famous quote comes about a year after his great Aldersgate experience, in which his heart was strangely warmed, and only a few months afterward, he began the scandalous activity of open-air preaching at the instigation of George Whitefield in 1739.

One would also think the quote was related to overseas missions, but instead, in the letter, Wesley is trying to justify his irregular practices of preaching in local parishes where he was not the priest in charge. The issue Wesley was addressing in his quote is the propriety of his preaching in the context of parishes other than his own. There is

¹ Scott, David W. "The World is not my Parish," *United Methodist Insight: Discerning God's Will for the Future*. <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-global-nature/the-world-is-not-my-parish/> 4 May, 2022; John Wesley, "Journal Entry, June 11, 1739," *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., Vol. 19, gen. eds. Richard P. Heitzenrater and Frank Baker (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 67.

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a rule about this registered by the Council of Nicaea and repeated within the ordinances of the Church of England as deemed improper.² However, Wesley felt bound by a higher authority to preach the gospel on spiritual grounds. He stated,

I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to. And sure I am that his blessing attends it.”³

Wesley’s original phrase was a manner of justifying his unconventional ministry, so he appeals to Scripture and to divine command to preach the gospel.

Wesley and George Whitefield were not allowed to preach in some established churches. Many leaders were concerned about Wesley and Whitefield’s preaching in Newgate, Bath, Baldwin Street, and Bowling Springs in Bristol. Wesley and Whitefield’s preaching was causing concerns among the higher elites of society. The famous passage is directly before his interaction with Beau Nash, the gambling-obsessed celebrity at the center of Bath’s elite, cosmopolitan set, who had rebuked Wesley for his public gatherings. Wesley pointed out to Nash that the public gatherings were meant to put down sedition, not religion.

Wesley’s letter with the famous quote, “the world is my parish,” is from an anonymous letter in response to anonymous comments about his unusual ministry. Since Wesley did not have a parish, such a prohibition would not stop him from preaching at all. Instead, he says, “I look upon all the world as my parish.” Scholars are not sure to whom Wesley wrote the letter, but it could have been John Clayton or James Harvey.⁴ Regardless of whom the letter was intended for, the famous quote is not focused on international missions but rather on Wesley’s desire to preach the gospel in his parish. Wesley was not that interested in international missions. He had a painful and failed mission among the indigenous Indians in Georgia. He was skeptical about the international missionary enthusiasm of Thomas Coke, the father of the international Methodist mission. He was reluctant to send missionaries to America because he supported the Church of England and his loyalty to the monarchy. As stated above, he even struggled with field preaching because it was unorthodox and was against the Church of England. One could argue that Wesley was more concerned about revival in England than about global missions.

To Spread Scriptural Holiness

The early Methodist movement was evangelistic. As Lacey Warner stated, “while other denominational traditions often trace their roots to disagreement regarding confessional or theological points, the Wesleyan tradition emerged from an evangelical and missional imperative.”⁵ In Wesley’s “Large” *Minutes*, he summarizes his understanding of Methodists’ purpose: “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up the preachers called Methodists was not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation and, in particular, the Church: and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”⁶ The definition reflects the para-church nature of early Methodism. The movement was not concerned primarily with bringing outsiders into the church but with encouraging and aiding nominal church members to take more seriously their Christian identity and formation. During the revival movement in England, Wesley instructed his clergy to revive the Church, along with spreading scriptural holiness.⁷ By contrast, when American Methodists organized The Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, they declared that “God’s purpose in

² See Ted Campbell, “Negotiating Wesleyan Catholicity,” in Daniel Castelo, ed., *Embodying Wesley’s Catholic Spirit* (Eugene, OR.: Pickwick, 2017).

³ John Wesley, “Journal Entry, 11 June 1739,” *Works*, 67.

⁴ See Andrew Goodhead, *The Crown and a Cross: The Rise, Development, and Decline of the Methodist Class Meeting in Eighteenth-Century England* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 92; Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 3rd edn (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 188.

⁵ Lacey Warner, “Spreading Scriptural Holiness: Theology and Practices of Early Methodism for the Contemporary Church,” *Asbury Theological Seminary*, 63:1 (2008), 115; See James Logan, “The Evangelical Imperative: A Wesleyan Perspective,” in *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage*, ed. James Logan (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 16; See Albert Outler, *Evangelism and Theology in Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996).

⁶ Wesley, “Large Minutes,” *Works*, 8:299.

⁷ The distinction of the ministry in Britain from the revival movement in America was the focus on ensuring Christian formation of congregants through liturgical practices. And while these were significant in the revival movement in America, much of the Methodist liturgical practices, such as weekly communion and small group formation, became less significant.

raising up preachers called Methodists in America was to reform the continent, and to spread holiness across the land.”⁸ As Randy Maddox states, “while there are echoes of the earlier statement here, note the goal of reforming the church has been dropped. At a structural level, this reflects the simple fact that American preachers were no longer a marginal subculture seeking to influence the establishment Anglicanism; they were now themselves the church.”⁹ As a result, the call to spread Scriptural holiness was less about reforming the church and those within the church, but more toward evangelism in the surrounding American context.

The Methodist revival movement grew to over 450,000 members by the end of the 19th century. The Methodist Episcopal Church formed a missionary society in 1819 and formed the Board of Home Missions for urban and rural populations in the United States. During the mid-1800s, the missionary society set up agencies in China, Japan, Korea, India, the Philippines and Oceania, Africa, and Latin America.¹⁰ The spreading of Scriptural holiness was reflected in taking seriously the Great Commission of “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19-20) and the result was the development of a global connectional denomination that embodies Wesley’s mission of spreading Scriptural holiness.

The World is *Not* My Parish

Wesley’s phrase, “the world is my parish,” has been used to promote and garner missionary efforts through the Methodist movement. The intent of the paper is not to speak against the missional and evangelistic efforts of the movement, but rather to provide a critique of the statement. Wesley’s phrase that addressed breaking ecclesial boundaries is later viewed as the basis for Methodist global missions.¹¹ Wesley’s expansive ecclesial vision fueled Methodist missionary expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to inform missionary efforts today.

However, as indicated above, many scholars recognize that Wesley’s quote was more about his breaking of ecclesial structures than it was about missionary engagement. David Scott indicates the phrase “my parish” is less reflected on missions and more closely associated with Wesley’s context. Scott indicates that Wesley’s phrase reflects an understanding of the world that is centered on *me*, rather than on *us*.¹² This view reflects a Western Christian perspective (not surprising given Wesley’s context and time) that often devalues non-Western Christians, especially when Westerners see themselves as the heroic saviors of the rest of the world. Western missionaries have used this approach for centuries in the name of Jesus to conquer and take over indigenous peoples throughout the world.

The influence of Constantinianism centuries before Wesley can be attributed to the integration of church and power, particularly when using Christian language such as “Our Lord,” “Our God,” and the use of Christian symbols on coins and military equipment. Constantinianism was the symbol and the concept related to how Western political power and Christian religious power are actively brought together in a mutually supportive relationship. In 313, Constantine issued an edict mandating the toleration of Christians that would set the stage for uniting his empire.¹³ The term *Christendom* is often used to denote the Constantinian framework between the relationship of the church and state, which entails that Christianity becomes intertwined with the state. Constantine made it easy for the world to be Christian, and the impact of this move is still felt today regarding the syncretism that takes place between the church and state (or government). Colonialism is tied to Constantinianism because religious authorities’ conquest of other groups deemed them as “the other,” “heretical,” “barbaric,” “anti-Christian,” or “anti-God.” Missionary expansion and colonizing efforts were not distinguished, and in many cases, violence and oppression were sanctioned by them.

⁸ See John Wesley, *General Rules and Methodist Discipline, 1785-1789* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 4.

⁹ Randy L. Maddox, “Wesley Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century Church,” *Quarterly Review*, 23.1 (2003), 2.

¹⁰ See Ashley Boggan D., et al. *American Methodism: A Compact History, Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2022), 66-68.

¹¹ See Kennett Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions, 1846-1914* (London: Epworth, 1995); Rupert E. Davis, *Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1976), 63-68; and Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thoughts and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 23-30.

¹² <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-global-nature/the-world-is-not-my-parish/>

¹³ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 117.

Since Wesley was committed to the primitive church by consulting the early Church Fathers and that succumbing to the power of the Roman empire had a detrimental impact on the validity of Christian witness, one wonders why Wesley would not have noticed the same dangers operative in his Anglican Church, whose global prominence was fueled by the expansion of the British empire. Wesley's own commitment to the British monarchy does not make him the ideal voice to speak on behalf of the decolonising of the tradition that sustains his name.¹⁴

For those who identify with the broader Methodist family, one should pause and reflect on the impact of the colonisation of the gospel historically, and currently as it relates to mission. The missionary endeavors of Christians from the Western world have been laced with examples of Colonialism as something that was done *against* other indigenous communities. One could deduce that Western Christians have taken the phrase, "the world is *my* parish," as a justification for missionary endeavors. Western missionaries perpetuated the notion that Western ideologies, infused with Christianity, were to be embraced and followed.

However, the desire to combat the postcolonial mission has taken place on several fronts since the time of Wesley. A couple of examples of resistance to colonialist forms of mission took place in 1928 by the International Missionary Council, in which there was a rich chronicle of resistance to Western colonialism on the part of the non-Western Christians. An example is the critique of missionary practices and the demand for indigenous leadership featured in the Council's deliberations as early as its 1938 meeting in Tambaram, India.

Also, Sanneh and Roberts reflect this shift towards contextualisation by empowering local agencies and indigenous voices and initiatives. They argue that global Christianity has shifted decisively from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific.¹⁵

Also, at the 1952 Willingen Meeting of the International Missionary Council in Willingen, Germany, the concept of *Missio Dei* is defined. The meeting took place in the shadow of World War II, the collapse of European power, and the rise of communism and Cold War tensions. Willingen's introduction of the concept of *Missio Dei* redefined the theological basis of mission in a post-war, decolonized world. The shift was a movement from a mission originating in the church to a mission originating in the Triune God, as a God who is a sending God. This Trinitarian grounding of mission destabilized mission from the "sender" to "receiver" as the primary agent of mission.¹⁶

The Post-Colonial Turn

The literature in the field of post-colonial studies continues to expand and grow. Decolonization entails resisting and transforming dominant theological imaginaries while offering ways of knowing that incorporate traditions and the wisdom of colonized and otherwise subjugated peoples. In Christian thought, decolonization entails resistance to dominant theological imaginaries while opening the ways of knowing that incorporate and deepen traditions and wisdom that come from colonized communities.¹⁷ Kwok Pui-Lan defined postcolonialism imagination as "a desire, a determination, and a process of engagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises."¹⁸

Postcolonial studies have moved into several different phases of thought. The first phase is the emergence of anticolonial thought focused on the struggle for political independence. The second phase began in the 1970's with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which focused on postcolonial studies in literature, history, and anthropology. The third phase moved to confront social and economic issues brought by globalization and the

¹⁴ Filipe Maia, "The Wesleyan Quartet: Wesleyan Theology in the Decolonial Turn," in *Decolonizing Wesleyan Theology: Theological Engagement from the Underside of Methodism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2024), 16-17.

¹⁵ Dana L. Roberts, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24, no. 2 (April 2000): 50-58. Also see Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion in Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 389-93.

¹⁷ See Ada María Ias-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); Yara González-Justiniano, *Centering Hope as a Sustainable Decolonial Practice* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2022).

¹⁸ Kwok Pui-Lan, *The Anglican Tradition from a Postcolonial Perspective* (New York: Seabury Books, 2023), 6.

economy. It has been used to study capitalist formation, struggle over land, gender, racial and ethnic politics, queer resistance, and global environmental issues.¹⁹

Edward Said, a Palestinian American, is generally hailed as the pioneer of postcolonial theory. It is interesting to note that he grew up in a religious Palestinian household with close ties to the Church. In his book, *Orientalism*, he argues that colonization implies not only political and military domination, but also cultural hegemony and colonial representation of the other.²⁰ Said is critical of Western academics who seek to depict the Orient as exotic and culturally different. Said also links the structures of colonialism with Western knowledge production and cultural representation. For example, the “East” is presented with stereotypes as female, passive, backward, and irrational, while the “West” represents masculine, aggressive, democratic, progressive, and rational. Thus, the public mind views the East as inferior to the West. This viewpoint was played out in missionary evangelism, schools, Western music, and cultural domination. The Western view of missions reflected an understanding of mission as sending missionaries “over there” by the mother-Church as the center, and the missions were on the periphery. Said makes a clarion call to Christian theologians and scholars in the “West” because they had contributed to the colonial narrative of the empire.

Also, in the field of biblical studies, Indian-born biblical scholar, R. J. Sugirtharajah who was deeply influenced by Said, argues that Western interpretations of Scripture sought to justify the West’s domination of the colonial and neo-colonial world.²¹ Sugirtharajah states, “postcolonial studies emerged as a way of engaging with the textual, historical and cultural articulations of societies disturbed and transformed by the historical reality of colonial presence.” There is an internal colonialism which operates when local political elites suppress the voices of the poor, of women, and of indigenous peoples, and neo-colonialism continues to operate against the interests of the poor in the “third world” in ways analogous to the former colonial powers. Postcolonial methodologies aim at ensuring that suppressed voices are heard.²²

The work of Sugirtharajah and other post-colonial biblical scholars has challenged the hegemony of traditional interpretation methods and proposed new paradigms of feminist criticism, cultural studies, and postcolonial criticism to understand Scripture. Scripture has moved from a sacred historical document to a relational view that involves interpretive communities. The shift from reading Scripture from *behind the text* (historical criticism) to the word *in the text* (literary criticism) and to the word *in front of the text* (reader-response)²³ provides a new reading of Scripture by the influence of “outsiders,” including Western women and non-Western critics residing in both the West and the Third World.²⁴ As Kwok Pui-lan states, “Postcolonial criticism has the potential to open up the interpretive process, making the Bible a highly relevant and invaluable resource for our postcolonial situation.”²⁵

A growing number of Third World biblical scholars are engaged in bringing a postcolonial critique to bear on the biblical text.²⁶ Their work is driven by their belief that the Bible was a colonial tool used to inculcate Western values and denigrate non-Western values and traditions. Also, the process of resistance to dominant Western interpretations has continued in the twentieth century in the writings of Latin American liberation theologians such

¹⁹ See Olivia U. Rutazibwa and Robbie Shilliam, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

²⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, 6–7; See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

²¹ See R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 75–76.

²² R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); See also, R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconstructions: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology*. (London: SCM Press, 2003); Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

²³ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 102–105. I provide a further argument for a post-colonial reading of Scripture in Mark A. Maddix, “Reimagining Christian Formation: Reading Scripture as ‘Real Presence,’” *Wesley Theological Journal*, 50:1 (2022), 43–61; Mark A. Maddix and Richard P. Thompson, “Scripture as Formation: The Role of Scripture in Christian Formation,” *Wesley Theological Journal*, 46:1 (2011), 134–149. While Wesley’s view of mission was representative of colonialism, his appropriation of Scripture reflected more of a post-colonial view by viewing Scripture as formation as lived and expressed in the life of the Church.

²⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, 2005, 104.

²⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, 2005, 78.

²⁶ See Musa W. Dube, “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” *Semeia* 78 (1997), 11–26; Kwok Pui-lan, “Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,” *Semeia* 47 (1989); R. S. Sugirtharajah, “The Bible and its Asian Readers,” *Biblical Interpretation* 1:1 (1993), 54–66.

as Gustavo Gutierrez and Elsa Tamez.²⁷ In these contexts, the oppressed are engaged in the work of biblical interpretation as the social location of the poor encourages a radical interpretation of the biblical text as compared to those in affluent universities and seminaries.

While the power of colonialism included the power of swords, armies, and economic imperialism, it was the power of the conquest of knowledge or a way of knowing that dominated colonized people groups. As a result, subjugated peoples were seduced to master the dominance of European knowledge and culture for the sake of gaining space at the colonial table.²⁸ More recently, this approach has been challenged by the Global South because of the shifting demographics. Most Christians are no longer found in the West or associated with centers of power. Since growth continued in the Global South, especially in Asia and Africa, Western Christendom is no longer the dominant voice.²⁹

These post-colonial divergent voices and perspectives challenge the center-periphery model and support the alternative of decentering the center. This means the Church must “image and articulate a reality not in monologic and Eurocentric mode, but rather from a dialogical and a polyphonic perspective.”³⁰ A dialogical approach to Christian witness challenges the “over there” approach, based on a territorial expansion model as the physical extension and numerical increase of the church. When missionaries today speak about “others” needing to hear the gospel, this understanding of mission assumes that truth is to be told, and others need to hear it. It sets up a Eurocentric epistemology that reinforces colonialism. It is more about the “world is *my* parish” instead of the “World is *our* Parish.”

Toward a Post-Colonial³¹ View of Christian Witness

The missionary enterprises of the Methodist movement greatly extended Christianity to the Global South, India, Asia, and Africa, and the new America further extended the reach of Christianity in many parts of the world. In all these cases, Christianity worked in close relationship with the colonial powers. The relationship between mission and colonialism took different shapes and expressions in each context, but these colonial structures and Christian mission were intertwined with power and authority. As David Bosch pointed out, “those of Western democracy and the free-enterprise systems, there was something businesslike about the launching of new societies.”³² The separation between the colonizers and the colonized had a different level of authority and power. Also, as the church grew and expanded, so did the marginalization of women and the exclusion of other people groups.

Today, we are keenly aware of our sins of the past (and many in the present) in sharing in the colonial mission. David Bosch’s claim that colonialism is fading away with postmodernity and mission has found a new freedom without the worry of colonial power seems misguided today.³³ While Bosch’s claim is true that there is growth in listening to the voices of the colonized, a post-colonial view of Christian witness is needed to ensure the Church continues to live out the gospel of Jesus, rooted in hospitality and inclusiveness, which expands Wesley’s vision to view all the “world as *our* parish.”³⁴

²⁷ See Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. C. Inda and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987); Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective*, trans. S. H. Ringe (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

²⁸ Filipe Maia, 9.

²⁹ Kwok Pui-Lan, 2023, 192–93. Western Christendom still yields its power of colonialism toward those in the East and Global South through ecclesial authority and financial resources; See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) for his focus on how the South has a different way of knowing that was shaped by oppression and by Western thought.

³⁰ Kwok Pui-Lan, 2023, 190–91.

³¹ There is great debate in postcolonial studies about the use of the term post-colonial because some argue that, even with the growth of post-colonial studies in the academy, there is concern that we are still living and engaged in colonialism. See Said and Pui-Lan for further analysis.

³² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 330–334; See Joerg Rieger, “Theology and Mission Between Neocolonialism and Postcolonialism.” *Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies*, 2004, 21:2, 201–27.

³³ Bosch, 1991, 349–362.

³⁴ See Marion Grau, *Rethinking Mission in the Postcolony: Salvation, Society, and Subversion*. (London, T&T Clark International, 2011); Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville: WJK, 2007), 128; Michael A. Rynkiewicz, *Soul, Self, and Society: A Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Postcolonial World*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

The question for those within the Wesleyan family is, how do we ensure we are not continuing a colonial view of empire and power? In what ways should we live in Christian community to ensure the gospel isn't about empire or dominance but rather about love, inclusion, and hospitality? In what ways do we ensure that marginalised voices are being heard and valued? In what ways do our Christian practices embody Christian witness? While there are a variety of ways to answer these questions, this paper intends to illustrate some possible practices for developing a post-colonial view of Christian witness. The paper suggests that Christian practices are in essence Christian witness.³⁵ Mission is embedded in Christian practice and reflects Christian witness. The paper suggests the following practices in developing a post-colonial view of Christian witness: re-membering Christ's body, table fellowship (hospitality), ecumenical engagement, and storytelling.

Christian Witness: Re-membering Christ's Body

A Wesleyan view of ecclesiology and mission can begin by developing a post-colonial view of Christian witness. Often, mission or evangelism is viewed separately from ecclesiology, but mission starts in ecclesiology. While the emergent church and missional church movements³⁶ helped move the church's focus to our neighbourhoods, it often reflected a more "open" ecclesiology that was separate from the local church. The influence of the missional church movement is reflected in how many pastors and church leaders view mission or evangelism as something that you *do*, rather than who you *are*. However, David Bosch's work *Transforming Mission* denotes a decisive shift from understanding mission soteriologically (in terms of saving souls), culturally (in terms of extending the benefits of Western culture) or ecclesiocentrically (where the church is the initiator and the goal of mission). For Bosch "mission is not an activity of the church, but an attribute of God."³⁷ In essence, viewing worship as mission avoids creating boundaries between the inner and outer life of the congregation since both are part of the mission of God.

A Wesleyan view of mission begins as the people of God gather for worship and participate in Word and Table. Mission and the Eucharist are tightly held together in a single vision. As Pelzel says, "It is my conviction that the rhythm of communion and mission, gathering and sending out—rooted in the very life of God, celebrated in the liturgy, and lived out in the world—provide the only adequate framework for gaining a comprehensive vision of the Church."³⁸ In essence, the church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the church.³⁹ The Eucharist life positions mission as a "re-membering" of Christ's body.⁴⁰ Mission begins as people gather around Word and Table and "breathe in" to be healed and renewed, so that we might go into the world to "breathe out" as the broken body and shed blood of Christ in the world. It is through the practices of the church that Christian people are "made" as they participate in the means of grace.

Wesley had a high view of communion as the pinnacle of Methodist worship. In Wesley's sermon on *The Duty of Constant Communion*, he indicates why Christians should participate in communion regularly by saying we are to participate in communion as much as possible because Christ commanded us, "*do this in remembrance of me*" (Luke 22:19). Also, scholars have debated whether Wesley believed only those baptised should participate in the table, while others view communion as inclusive for all persons.⁴¹

³⁵ See Benjamin T. Connor, *Practicing Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 11. Connor defines missional theology as a kind of practical theology that explores in every aspect of the theological curriculum and praxis of the church the implications of the missionary nature of God: See Bryan Stone, 173. Stone views the ecclesial practices of the church such as baptism, Eucharist, hospitality, and forgiveness as embodying the politics and economy of evangelism. For Stone, evangelism is in ecclesial practices; See Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989). Harris says when the Church worships and shares life together it becomes the curriculum that educates and forms Christians.

³⁶ See Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2003); John R. Franke, *Missional Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020); Craig Van Gelder & Dwight J. Zscheile, et al. *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Randy S. Woodley and Bo C. Sanders, *Decolonizing Evangelicalism: An 11:59 Conversation*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020).

³⁷ David J. Bosch, "Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission." *American Society of Missiology Series*, no. 16 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), 389–93: See Benjamin T. Connor, *Practicing Christian Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).

³⁸ Morris Pelzel, *Ecclesiology: The Church as Communion and Mission* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), 11.

³⁹ John Zizioulas, *Being and Communion* (Yonkers, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ See William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 228–230.

⁴¹ See Mark A. Maddix, "Inclusion or Exclusion: Wesleyan Eucharist Theology of Mission and Reconciliation." *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 54:1 (2019), 40–55.

Wesley followed the *Book of Common Prayer* as the primary resource for his Eucharistic liturgy. Many Methodist congregations continue to follow the traditional four-fold approach to worship that includes readings from the *Book of Common Prayer* and other forms of liturgical readings. The question is whether Methodist liturgical practices are contributing to a colonist's view of mission? More recent post-colonial scholars such as Kwok Pui-Lan, Michael J. Jagessar, and Stephen Burns argue that "postcolonial theory can be applied to draw attention to and question the colonial and imperial influences in Christian worship, liturgical texts, architecture, symbols, arts, and music, and to offer reconstructive readings of these texts and liturgical interpretations."⁴²

Feminist scholars like Gail Ramshaw have challenged language in the Creeds that use images of "king" and the "kingdom of God" in worship. She suggests we use language such as "sovereign" and "monarch" because these words are non-gender specific. Instead of kingship, we should use the language of "reign," "dominion," and "commonwealth" as alternatives to retranslate "kingdom," or use "kindom."⁴³ While this helps in some ways it can still lead to images of reign or dominion, which still speak of empire. Also, the propagation of a monotheistic Christian God image as a male being, modeled after the father, king, and lord, introduced gender asymmetry into the religious symbolic system and reinforced male domination.⁴⁴

Recent attempts in liturgical studies include the development of lectionary readings that are written from a woman's perspective. For example, Church Publishing has developed a *Women's lectionary for the Whole Church* by Wilda C. Gafney, an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church pastor. She states, "The series recognizes that the scriptures are an androcentric collection of documents steeped in patriarchalism, this lectionary grapples with the gender constructs of the text rather than romanticizing admirable heroines."⁴⁵ Gafney's work, along with others, is an attempt to reframe the texts so that women are at the center of the story, and to reclaim a post-colonial view of Christian witness.

The Book of Common Prayer has been translated into many other languages and contextualized to address colonial perspectives of Christian witness. For example, the Anglican Church produced *A New Zealand Book of Common Prayer* that includes images and language that remove aspects of colonialization and reflect their own cultural context. Also, the use of general inclusive language when referring to God and to humans is another important way to ensure that colonialists' views of mission are addressed. The use of masculine pronouns for God and the use of masculine metaphors and images are often translated into other languages which reinforces androcentric biases.

Christian Witness: Table Fellowship (hospitality)

Since Christians are *formed* and *made* through communal worship as they participate in Word and Table, they become Christian witnesses in the world without needing to develop an evangelistic or missional strategy. The church is a witness in the neighborhood and communities by living out the redemptive work of Christ. While this is true, the church continues to struggle to be inclusive of all voices, particularly voices that have been abused by colonialist power and dominance. One possible avenue of developing a catholicity of the Church is through creating hospitable spaces for conversation and dialogue through table fellowship. While Jesus preached the good news of the gospel, much of his ministry focused on meeting with persons such as tax collectors, Pharisees, Zealots, and prostitutes, which broke down inherit social hierarchies and stereotypes. As Stone states, "each is called to care for the other person's place over one's own, and greatness is defined by serving a table and washing dirty feet."⁴⁶ A post-colonial view of Christian witness cannot reinforce privilege and hierarchy, but a place of welcome, belonging, and inclusion.

The table fellowship of Jesus should also be understood from the cultural, religious, and political world of Jesus.⁴⁷ Table fellowship was not only an expression of solidarity with the marginalized but was also a proclamation of his

⁴² See Michael J. Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Kwok Pui-Lan, 2023, 100-101.

⁴³ Gail Ramshaw, *Liturgical Language: Keeping It Metaphoric, Making it Inclusive*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 101.

⁴⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, 2005, 154-155.

⁴⁵ Wilda C. Gafney. *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2024), xxii.

⁴⁶ Stone, 79.

⁴⁷ Jae Soon Park, "Jesus' Table Community Movement and the Church," *Asian Journal of Theology*, 7:1 (1993), 60-79.

protest the socio-religious structures that supported the discrimination. It was a protest of the political powers of his time. Jesus modeled an all-inclusive table as part of his meal practice, in contrast to the exclusive meal customs of the prominent religious figures of Jewish society. Jesus' association with the outcasts of society eventually led him to the cross and to death.

The early church practiced this kind of table hospitality as reflected in Acts 2:42-47 where believers gathered for worship and fellowship. The passage focuses on four qualities of the new Church: the apostles' teachings, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. The passage includes two distinct pairs that are linked together. The first is "the apostles' teachings" and "fellowship or *koinonia*." The apostles' teaching was not about doctrine but about the testimony or witness of the twelve disciples about Jesus' ministry and resurrection. The fellowship focused on the bond between two persons. The first pair reminds us of the importance of the proclamation of the gospel and the social bond among believers. The second part of the passage focuses on "the breaking of bread" and "prayers." The breaking of bread doesn't refer to communion, but rather it focuses on sharing a meal. And the prayers refer to times of prayer in the temple for worship.⁴⁸

During Jesus' time, the sharing of a table meant sharing life. For Jews, table fellowship was always a religious affirmation of belonging. It was a sign of intimacy, love, communion, and fellowship. It also meant fellowship before God with anticipation of the messianic banquet. When Jesus proclaimed the "Kingdom of God," its vision took a praxis model of table fellowship that sharing in bread heralded equality and restored human dignity.⁴⁹ The eating of a meal at a common table creates solidarity and unity and fosters a post-colonial view of Christian witness.

Christian Witness: Ecumenical Engagement

Another practice that could help enhance a post-colonial Christian witness is ecumenical engagement. The invitation to invite other Christians from other traditions into the conversation, particularly the colonized, will help expose the blind spots of Western forms of Christian witness. Since Christendom is declining in the West and growing in other parts of the world, and missionaries are being sent from non-Western contexts to the West, learning from their experiences could help to ensure that post-colonial forms of Christian witness are not perpetuated (assuming they haven't already adopted a colonialist approach from the West). In these contexts, Christian witness would not occur out of a "centrist ecclesial identity," as in Christendom, but out of a marginal and ambiguous status as in a post-colonial and post-Christendom situation.⁵⁰ Such engagement can help the Western church be more faithful in the practice of Christian witness in a post-colonial context.

The ecumenical movement led by the International Missionary Council and later the World Council of Churches represents a major shift in 20th century Protestant thinking about mission. They moved from an alignment with colonial structures to explicit critique of colonialism to contextual and justice-oriented approaches. This shift included three primary areas: (1) a growing critique of colonialism, (2) a transformation of missionary practice from paternalism to partnership, (3) the emergence of contextual theology as a normative paradigm.

Shoki Coe and others within WCC circles advanced "contextualization" beyond mere adaptation; it became a methodological commitment to doing theology in critical interaction with local realities. This approach affirmed that theology is always situated and that non-Western churches are not recipients of theology but producers of it. Stephen Bevans describes this as the recognition that all theology is contextual and that the global Church is inherently plural and polycentric.⁵¹ The shift effectively destabilized Western theological normativity and redefined catholicity in terms of intercultural reciprocity.

⁴⁸ See Richard P. Thompson, *Acts: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2015), 96-99.

⁴⁹ See Francis Velankanni, "The Eucharist and Table Fellowship in the New Testament," *East Asian Pastoral Institute*. <https://catholicmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/The-Eucharist-and-Table-Fellowship.pdf>

⁵⁰ Samuel Escobar, *Changing Tides: Latin America and World Mission Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), 150-153.

⁵¹ See Stephan B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002); Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constant in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004).

The ecumenical movement of the World Council of Churches represented not just a merely institutional reorganization but a profound missiological reconfiguration. The trajectory of these changes illustrates the gradual decentering of Western hegemony within global Protestantism and the emergence of mission as participation in the *Missio Dei* with diverse socio-political contexts. These ecumenical conversations played a large role in the shift toward a postcolonial perspective on Christian mission.

Also, Amos Yong states that ecumenical engagement reflects mission as “nothing more or less than our participation in the hospitality of God.”⁵² In his view, hospitality provides a rich framework to think about how many tongues, gifts, and works of the Spirit enable and empower a wide range of Christian practices about other religious traditions and people of other faiths.⁵³ Through providing hospitable practices such as social witness and interreligious dialogue, not only is God’s hospitality extended to the world, but the church receives hospitality of God through interaction with other religions. For Yong, not only are we “participating in the redemptive hospitality of God, even while we are conduits of this hospitality to the world,” but we also discern the Spirit’s presence and activity in people of other faiths.⁵⁴ In essence, both ecumenical and inter-religious engagement can help the Western church to hear voices from other faith traditions and other religions to develop a post-colonial view of mission.

Wesley’s sermon on “The Catholic Spirit” expresses the desire to respect the broader faith traditions to hear other perspectives. Wesley understood the importance of humility when it comes to various beliefs and practices, even as they assent to love of God and neighbor. Wesley understood that humans can only know in part and need the broader faith community to inform Christian faith and practice.⁵⁵ While Wesley doesn’t speak about other religions, it seems that catholic spirit could be applied there as well.

Christian Witness: Storytelling

The proclamation of the gospel as a post-colonial Christian witness needs to move from a cognitive engagement (which often represents colonialism’s empire) to the practice of storytelling. Storytelling provides colonized persons to share their stories as a means of proclaiming the good news of the gospel. A recent work by Oinike Natalia Harefa reconstructs evangelism from a feminist postcolonial missiological perspective. Harefa offers the idea of seeing evangelism as storytelling that witnesses the Trinitarian God that recovers witnessing narratives of women in witnessing the gospel.⁵⁶ For Harefa, “the gospel as embodied story is based on the incarnation (embodiment), which aims to enable humans to enter into a Trinitarian relationship.”⁵⁷

Storytelling includes witnessing and sharing that mediates against colonialist views of evangelism, which fosters confrontation, truth-telling, and calls for a decision of faith. Storytelling provides an opportunity to invite people who have similar struggles and questions into a conversation that can lead to healing, liberation, and transformation. When colonized persons, or hybridity persons, share their stories, their voices are heard, which enables them to experience the transforming grace of the gospel.

Proclamation and preaching in Western colonized contexts give privilege to an expository form of preaching informed by the Enlightenment and have the tendency to dismiss mystery and imagination. Expository preaching, which is typically preached by white males, has an inherent tendency to convey “truth” as gospel. Proclamation as post-colonial Christian witness requires a movement toward a narrative that reflects more of human experience as social beings and provides an avenue for people to thread their story into the faith tradition.⁵⁸ Narrative forms of preaching locate the intersection between our lives and the lives of those in the story of Scripture.

⁵² Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 131.

⁵³ Yong, 65.

⁵⁴ Yong, 128; See Benjamin T. Conner, *Practicing Christian Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).

⁵⁵ John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit,” Sermon 39. ed. Albert Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., Vol. 2, gen. eds. Heitzenrater, Richard P. and Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975-1995), 2:93.

⁵⁶ Oinike Natalia Harefa, *Evangelism as Storytelling: A Reconstruction of Evangelism from a Feminist Postcolonial Missiological Perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2024).

⁵⁷ Harefa, 4.

⁵⁸ See Joel B. Green and Michael Pasquarello, III, *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 16-18.

Narrative preaching is an imaginative way of seeing that invites all persons in the process of meaning-making. Meaning-making is an important part of faith formation. One of the ways that meaning-making takes place is through the process of narrative preaching as an exercise of imagination. Barbara Brown Taylor describes imagination as “in the imaginative act, two ideas are struck together and sparks leap through the air between them, revealing familiar notions in a new life.”⁵⁹ For Taylor, imagination is a way of seeing, and to see something is the ability to imagine that it is possible for you in your context.

Conclusion

John Wesley’s famous quote, “the world is my parish,” represents his preaching in parishes where he was not in charge, which were not accepted by church leaders. Wesley’s phrase did not focus on world missions, even though the phrase was used by Methodists to spread scriptural holiness throughout the world. Wesley’s missionary efforts, along with many who followed, represents a colonialist view of mission, which has limitations for a post-colonial view of Christian witness today.

An attempt at developing a post-colonial view of Christian witness takes into consideration the critique of diverse voices as it relates to theology, biblical studies, and missions. These perspectives are needed to inform Christian witness in a multi-ethnic and diverse world of the colonized and people of hybridity. The Church’s witness is reflected in the practices as a living witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. While the Church consists of many practices to ensure that “the world is *our* parish,” a post-colonial Christian witness that includes the re-membering of the Body of Christ, table fellowship (hospitality), ecumenical engagement, and storytelling can provide a means to participate in God’s mission in the world.

⁵⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life: Living out Your Vocation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993), 45.

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