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**Rethinking Wesley's Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century for a Contemporary Methodism in Africa**

1<sup>st</sup> Dr. (Rev). Mwita James, PhD- Kenya Methodist University

2<sup>nd</sup> Rev Dr Mary Kathambi Kinoti PhD - Kenya Methodist University

**Abstract**

Methodism is a religious movement that goes back to John Wesley in part and to Charles Wesley to some extent. As a consequence of these two brothers who witnessed the early expansion of revitalization against great opposition, the Methodism and Evangelical Revival developed in 1781-1791 and Methodism became a separate denomination. The profundity of the theological aspect of the mystery of Wesley's doctrinal and Mission-logical way of thought has never been completely recognized. A basic assumption here is that profound God personal experiences and formative theological perspectives constantly coexist and shape one another. Wesley recognized and comprehended this. He did not seek an experience of God without a substantive theological framework, nor did he fancy a simpler theological framework that was separate or separable from the aspect of experiencing God. He sought a religious context that conveyed this feeling and developed it. Online Survey method was used in the study to determine the significance of Wesleyan theology in modern African Methodism, the research aimed at theological experts and leaders from diverse African Methodist congregations, the convenience sampling approach was used in the study to choose a sample of 10 respondents from the intended population, the primary data was gathered using online questionnaires, which collected both qualitative and quantitative information from respondents. Secondary data on Wesleyan theology was obtained through the study's use of online publications and books, the material gathered served as the conceptual foundation for the significance of Wesleyan theology in modern African Methodism, which validated the findings. The study found startling developments in modern Methodist theology in the rethinking of John Wesley theology, by leading Methodist and Wesleyan theologians, who found his work to be educative, challenging and encouraging in their examination on theology. Such a comprehensive and intentional discussion by Wesleyan theologians is uncommon in this century, and far rarer in the previous century than is widely assumed. This study tries to incorporate the Wesleyan theology in unifying Methodism in Africa, as well as to examine and resolve many difficulties confronting Methodism in Africa, and to evoke it in awakening spirituality in contemporary African Methodism.

*Keywords:* Methodism, Methodist, John Wesley, Wesleyan Theology, African Methodism

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0. Background of the study**

Methodism, commonly known as the Methodist movement, is a set of historically connected Protestant Christian groups that take their philosophy of practice and belief from John Wesley's teachings, as well as other important early leaders in the effort including George Whitefield and John's brother Charles Wesley (Southey R, 1820). Methodists were named for the methodological approach in which their Christian religion was carried out. Methodism developed in the Church of England in the 18th century and was named after Wesley's death. The Methodist Churches support Wesleyan theology, which emphasizes sanctification and the transformative influence of religion on the character of a Christian (Bentley, W. 2010). The new birth, certainty, imparted righteousness, the potential of total sanctification, and actions of piety are distinguishing beliefs. Although Scripture is regarded as the ultimate authority, Methodists also look to Christian tradition, particularly the ancient creeds. Methodists believe that Jesus Christ, God's Son, died for all humankind and that redemption is open to all. This is an Arminian theology, as opposed to the Calvinist belief that God has predetermined the salvation of a certain set of individuals. However, Whitefield and several other early founders of the movement were Calvinistic Methodists and adhered to the Calvinist viewpoint. Methodism emphasizes generosity and assistance for the ill, impoverished, and oppressed via deeds of mercy, in addition to evangelism (Runyon, 1998). These values are put into action via the development of hospitals, orphanages, and schools to fulfil Christ's commission to proclaim the good news and serve all people.

In this century, modern Methodism in Africa appears to be facing extremely serious challenges; there appears to be an urgent need for unifying Methodist congregations in Africa to forge a single route toward accomplishing Methodism's aims. Therefore, rethinking Wesley's theology and studying his teachings extensively may prove useful in answering the conundrum that arises concerning the aspect of spirituality in current Methodism in Africa by attempting to mitigate the current issues, as it is clear that in this century and before, there is an understandably significant lack of proper comprehensive and extensive discourse concerning Wesleyan theology (Collins, K. J. 2003). To understand Wesleyan theology it is important to fathom the original teachings of the founders

of Methodism. Notably, Wesleyan Methodists align with the Arminian understanding of free choice, as contrasted to the theological inevitability of absolute predestination. Methodism argues that redemption begins when a person decides to respond to God, who brings the believer closer to him, based on the Wesleyan theology of prevenient grace, and so teaches synergism (Snyder, 2018). Methodists consider the Bible to convey that Jesus Christ's atoning act is for all humankind, but effectual for those who react and accept, in conformity with the Restoration doctrines of grace and faith. John Wesley taught four fundamental key points of Methodism, including that a person is free not only to reject but also to freely receive salvation; that all people who obey the gospel according to the degree of knowledge given to them will be saved; that the Holy Spirit assures the Christian that they are justified by faith in Jesus, who is the certainty of faith; and that Christians in this life can achieve salvation (Field, D. N. 2015).

Methodist doctrine of salvation accentuates the role of holiness in redemption. Therefore, for Methodists, real faith never exists apart from deeds. Thus, Methodism, which includes the holiness doctrine, argues that righteousness is contingent on compliance and development in purification, stressing a strong dependency on Christ not just in adopting belief, but also in continuing in religious belief (Maddox, 1998). John Wesley preached that obeying the moral rule enshrined in the Ten Commandments, as well as participating in actions of devotion and kindness, were required for human salvation. Methodists additionally believe in the second act of salvation, Christian completeness, often defined as total sanctification, which cleanses the believer of original sin and renders him holy. According to John Wesley, complete sanctification, or Christian perfection, is nothing neither more nor less than genuine affection; love that expels sin and governs both the spirit and actions of a good Christian. Methodist congregations say that defection can result from a lack of belief or through transgression. If a believer falls away from God but subsequently desires to reconnect, they must repent their transgressions and be completely cleansed anew (Langford, T. A. 1998). John Wesley explicitly argued that experienced faith is an element of the theological approach. In other terms, if the truth were genuinely valid, it would be sanctified in the lived experiences of Believers, as well as every belief must be logically defensible. He did not separate religion and reasoning. Logic asks faith-related issues and strives to comprehend God's action and will. Wesley, on the other hand, contended that custom, experience, and reasoning were always subordinate to Scripture since only there is God's word presented in such a way that it is required for salvation (Langford, 1998).

### **1.1. Problem statement**

Although reflected from the past, John Wesley's theology is alive and active influence in modern theology. The Wesleyan tradition thrives when it is attentive to its history while remaining receptive to its future (Runyon, T. 1998). Our current contemporary environment is a dehumanizing one, with ineffective political strategies, a justice structure that favours the privileged, and a lack of principles that is tearing us apart. In such a setting, churches' purpose should be to become more communities of cohesiveness, rather than communities of restriction or discrimination (Hempton, D. 2013). This might explain why our ecclesiastical rituals place so little emphasis on grace and thankfulness. For this to be adopted authentically, we must revisit the entire narrative of Methodism after Wesley, giving special emphasis to the transition from a group to a structure of Wesley sects. We must, particularly, confront Methodism's canonical past. We must pay close consideration to the formal, canonical judgments made in this regard, recognizing the precise canonical heritages established and the canonical procedures devised to change them through time. It helps immensely to place this in proper Wesleyan form against the backdrop of the first century Church's canonical history. One of the focal areas among others here would be the revitalization of vigorous baptismal and Eucharistic activity. Equally essential is a thorough revision of what we may have learned about the multifaceted workings of the Holy Spirit from Wesley's teachings as well as other teachings.

### **1.2. Purpose of the study**

The sole purpose of this study is to evaluate methods to incorporate Wesleyan theology in unifying Methodism in Africa, as well as to examine and resolve many difficulties confronting Methodism in Africa, and to evoke it in awakening spirituality in contemporary African Methodism

### **1.3. Research question**

The study answered the following question;

What insights can Wesleyan theology offer towards unifying Methodism in Africa and the formation of contemporary spirituality in Africa today?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Revisiting Wesley's theology would be incomplete without critically assessing, his evangelism and teachings as recorded in theological literature. Outler, Albert & Richard Heitzenrater (1991) notes that in terms of open service, the Wesley brothers bestowed Methodism with multiple practices; the procedural Liturgy, on the one side, as well as the non-ritualistic teaching sermon on the other. But since reverence in the Church of England was legally predicated on the Liturgy, and devotion in Non - conformist churches was almost entirely that of sermons services, with Holy Communion being given seldom, this practice became unique of Methodism. Because of John Wesley's impact, the two practices were blended in Methodism, a condition that is still prevalent in the contemporary church (Hempton 2013). According to Miles & Rebekah, the periodic Love Celebration is also another activity that distinguished Methodism, as John Wesley claimed that it constituted an apostolic command. The usage of Covenant Services is a further distinguishing liturgical element of Methodism, whilst procedure varies by different churches; most Methodist congregations yearly reaffirm their relationship with God in response to John Wesley's request. In Methodist churches, it is customary for each church to have a yearly Covenant Service on the very first suitable Sunday of the year, and Wesley's covenant liturgy is still utilized. As a result of John Wesley's advocacy for public outreach, revival sessions are classic Methodism worship customs that are frequently hosted in churches (Collins, 2003).

Wesley defined Methodism's aim as to reform the country, and especially the Church, and to propagate Biblical righteousness

throughout the land. Methodism's aim, according to Wesley, was to develop holy individuals whose presence and action would alter the Church and society. Wesley's message was that God, in His love, intended not only to forgive people but also to release them from the bondage of sin and change them via the Spirit. His intention was for those who accepted to become righteous people. As a result, he emphasized their incorporation into groups and communities for them to progress in righteousness. Therefore, this indicates that Wesley advocated for the union of people in righteousness. Wesley emphasized that sincere faith results in both inner and outer purity (Langford, 1998). The interior regeneration process cannot help but manifest itself as an enhanced moral character on the outside. The holiness concept is founded on the mandate to be holy as God is holy. Wesley defined perfection in theological terms as moral maturity and ever-increasing love for God. The word "perfection" in the New Testament comes from a Greek concept that signifies maturity or completeness, not flawlessness. As a result, whenever Wesley mentioned holiness, sanctification, or perfection, he used the term Christian perfection to avoid parallels with the Reformists, whose unrealistic views of perfection led them to feel that holiness or personal sanctification is not conceivable in this life. Christian perfection, according to Wesley, is attainable in this life since it is concerned with the passions. When one's love for God and others is rendered pure and full by the grace of God infused into the soul via the Holy Spirit, their lifestyle cannot but rise in virtue, finding expression in loving, unselfish deeds. These concepts by Wesley can be very instrumental in bringing spirituality back to Methodist churches in Africa.

Most of the challenges facing churches in this century can be easily remedied by referring to and contemplating the Wesley theological teaching. (Maddox & Randy 1998). This may seem to be a cliché, because they may seem simple and inapplicable to this era, but the fact remains that his teachings are quite poignant and easily applicable, especially to most of the emerging issues facing Methodism in Africa in this century. For instance, Scripture knowledge is a major issue in the church, making most of those difficulties that the Christianity faith faces in the twenty-first century difficult to address (Vickers, J. E. 2016). Broadly said, individuals in churches, and much more so those who are not in churches, may give church service to the value of the Scripture, but they do not study or comprehend it. Believers should be persons of embodiment, individuals who are linked to God and each other and via the dwelling, uniting force of the Holy Spirit. However, our lives in the twenty-first century are so busy and distracted that every minute takes us further from the present. The church should revisit its role as bearers of God's influence on society, and to do so, it needs to build practices and liturgies that provide the opportunity and outline for the presence of God to be felt and recognized. Technology is moving believers away from the unified experience and towards detached experience. Believers are increasingly living their lives through computers, media, applications, and smartphones their interactions have overly become digital. Such aggravates pre-existing Gnostic inclinations, a cognitive instead of lived religion, and gently vastly overstates the critical embodiment of the church, the "body of Christ" in the tangible instead of conceptual understanding. Especially during the present hard times as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic, which discourages physical interactions, Christians seem to have forgotten the importance of togetherness in worship. Churches ought to develop methods to foster bodily meetings, partake in the Lord's Supper, neighbourhood dinners together. Anything at all to reawaken believers to the physical presence of the church in the world, as greatly emphasized by John Wesley himself in his teachings.

Unsurprisingly, the materialism of modern Religion has resulted in Methodist congregations that are more homogenous than ever. Contemporary Christians attend congregations that are a comfortable match for them; because they surround themselves with people who appear, talk, and worship similarly to them (Field, D. N. 2015). However, uniformity is not a scriptural objective, the force of the gospel, as exemplified by Wesley's theology, is that it unites disparate classes of individuals, bringing aside the barriers of animosity those that inherently separate individuals, including ethnicity, wealth, culture, gender etc. However, this continues to be the most difficult problem in the quest to integrate Methodist churches in Africa; to achieve unification, an extreme variety must be tolerated in the church. Lack of spirituality among today's believers is a very disappointing issue. Contrary to Wesley's theology, at the core of it is a lack of faith in transformation and a poor theology of holiness, an issue that contributes to assertions of reductionism and immutability (Runyon, 1998). Since the Spirit who resurrected Jesus out of the grave is still living, Believers ought to be messengers of revival and optimism. However, the feeble faith in transformation is linked with a glorification of imperfection, which is a poisonous confluence. Numerous people are just more driven by sin rather than sanctity, and this is a huge issue that the church should seek to rectify by awakening spirituality in their congregations, believers need new thinking of spirituality, particularly the thinking embodied in the Wesleyan theology (Snyder, 2018). Otherwise, this issue tends to raise a greater challenge to the church in 21st-century society than the widespread belief that individuals are the ultimate upholders of their own identities, morals, and fate. The expression individualist concept of "being and doing anything that makes sense to one-self" is profoundly in conflict with Christianity, which challenges believers to submission to Christ's reign. Churches should respond by instructing individuals to surrender their self-conviction, no matter how honest and truthful they are, to the sovereignty of Lord Jesus as portrayed in the Bible.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Online Survey method was used in the study to determine the significance of Wesleyan theology in modern African Methodism. According to McManus and Tracey (2020), the online survey is quick to perform due to the higher response rate and real-time access. Furthermore, it is quick and efficient in researching the web-accessible population. According to McManus and Tracey (2020), the design is used to obtain information from respondents at a time that is convenient for them and to provide an environment free of pressure to provide answers to questions that would otherwise make them feel uncomfortable to answer in a face-to-face interview. The research aimed at theological experts and leaders from diverse African Methodist congregations. The convenience sampling approach was used in the study to choose a sample of 10 respondents from the intended population. The core data was gathered using online questionnaires, which collected both qualitative and quantitative information from respon-

dents.

Secondary data on Wesleyan theology was obtained through the study's use of online publications and books. Literature resources from peer-reviewed journal papers and publications from religious institutions and faith-based groups were among the items used. The material gathered served as the conceptual foundation for the significance of Wesleyan theology in modern African Methodism, which validated the findings. SPSS was used to evaluate quantitative data, which was then presented in frequency tables and cross-tabulation. The collected qualitative data was examined and analyzed before being compared to previous data from secondary sources. The data gathered was utilized to back up the results, summary, conclusions, and recommendations.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The study's objective was to determine the significance of Wesleyan theology in modern African Methodism. The results of the research indicated that Wesleyan theology is essential in unifying and promoting Methodism in Africa. It is evident that, since its earliest inception, the church, has always struggled in balancing its relationships and allegiances with secular entities (Hempton, 2013). This has raised an issue of contention in contemplation of at what point do these affiliations affect the allegiance to Christ and the church. In this century these concerns have affected the church, this is shown in the tangled relations of Believers in politics, to the extent where some believers tend to suggest that certain unpleasant features of society are political, rather than biblical ideals, thereby giving themselves a cause to engage. The contemporary emphasis on class politics makes this much more difficult, as any particular member of the church may regard their Christian identification as subordinate to another orientation (Bentley, W. 2010). Churches, therefore, have the difficult issue of identifying and embracing diverse orientations while somehow pressing members to prioritize them appropriately. Church and religious figures should be frank and forthright concerning their own mistakes and failings; church functions effectively once it is open about its inadequacies. Since every organization is made up of people, hubris may have an impact on it, humans are already living in the Era of the Faith. Convictions, doctrine, and faiths are meaningless if Christians do not feel the Presence of God and grace in their own lives. People in this century want to know that the church is eager to serve the community and make a difference. This entails venturing beyond the church's boundaries and reclaiming more lives to salvation because Christ invites believers to evangelical life in society. There is already a lot of suffering, sorrow, and hunger that has to be handled regionally and worldwide and the church has to fill that void and provide extra help (Jennings & Theodore W 1990).

Churches have historically been sluggish to address injustice and misconduct, particularly when it comes to governmental authorities, some individuals cause conflict, and they should be identified and be reprimanded by the church because enabling poor conduct to endure ultimately harms the wellbeing of the society. During this moment in time, in this century, we must accept with honesty that consensus on some societal issues might prove too hard to attain, and this is not a betrayal or a rejection of scripture. Battling over such issues has resulted in tremendous unintended harm and might be rather redirected towards affection, devotion, and understanding. Believers should strive to lead by example in terms of peaceful conversation on difficult matters, recognizing that dissent is unavoidable. Greater cohesion and less divisiveness are required in Christianity. No one is flawless, but we all transgress and possess imperfections, therefore the church ought to be a sanctuary wherein everyone is accepted. It is hard for individuals to start mending and reconstructing their life if they are criticized and ostracized (Outler, Albert & Heitzenrater 1991). Judgment simply exacerbates grief; and besides, Jesus instructed not to condemn lest you be condemned. Therefore the Methodist church in Africa needs to follow such ways to solidify the unity of Methodism in Africa as well as to uplift spirituality in its ranks as well as in its believers, for such values, are some of the core values that have been embodied in the Wesleyan theology. As Wesley himself clearly stated that if the Church is, at its core, a body of believers, no person who is not a Christian believer can be part of it. If this entire body is motivated by a single spirit, endowed by single faith, one hope, and their mission, therefore anybody who lacks that spirit, faith, and hope is not a part of this unit (Wesley J, 1984).

#### **V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

##### **A. Conclusion**

It is therefore essential to note that the prevailing reassessment of Wesley's theology as exemplified in this study is merely to unify Methodism in Africa, as well as to examine and resolve many difficulties confronting Methodism in Africa, and to evoke it in awakening spirituality in contemporary African Methodism. It also represents a rising dissatisfaction with the dominant scholarly form of theology, where Wesley was earlier assessed and deemed inadequate. There is a growing push in modern scholarly theological groups for a much more strongly related concept and conduct of profound theological thought to Christian faith and liturgy.

##### **B. Recommendation**

It is recommended that, once Wesleyan theology is examined in the perspective of such a pragmatic practice of theology, it is clear that it does not only obtain a much more positive judgment but also appears as an outstanding example. The significance of this kind of revived respect for Wesley's vision of actual theological involvement cannot be overstated. As previously stated, the rejection of Wesley's paradigm of theological engagement was followed by the concealing of certain of his greatest unique theological views. It would imply that a rediscovered grasp of his paradigm of theological action may be extremely beneficial in the present efforts to elucidate the issues and consequences of Wesley's theological views. This could also aid with the existing endeavour to restore Wesley as a theological protégé for his modern forebears and the greater Religious society, as well as alleviating diverse challenges impacting the church in the twenty-first century, rather than lessening his significance to that of the contemporary founder or codifying him as a scholarly leader (Snyder, 2018).

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