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Review of *The Form and Power of Godliness: Wesleyan Communal Discipline as Voluntary Suffering*

Themes

“Today, the United Methodist Church has almost entirely abandoned the original Methodist structure for making disciples of Jesus Christ. … Therefore, this paper will argue that the contemporary abandonment of Wesleyan discipline undermines the vitality of the UMC, because being truly Methodist means being Wesleyan” (Watson, *The Form and Power of Godliness*, 1).

The Form and Power of Godliness: Wesleyan Communal Discipline as Voluntary Suffering was presented at the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society by Kevin Watson. This paper outlines the connection of belief to actions and doctrine to discipline that is a part of the DNA of the Wesleyan movement and The United Methodist Church. The connection of faith and action is found in the discipleship structures of accountability and self-denial which were a part of the Wesleyan revival movement that began in the 1700’s.

Watson gives a brief history of the discipleship structure of the Wesleyan revival including societies, classes and bands. This structure was vehicle for individuals to move toward Christian perfection, the perfect love of God and neighbor, in a community of accountability and self-denial. As years passed, self-denial became to be inconsistently valued by Wesleyans and the people of The United Methodist Church. As self-denial and yielding to accountability became less common within The United Methodist Church the connection between belief and actions continued to weaken.

Watson asserts that the connection between belief and actions would be foreign to many contemporary United Methodists. Being held accountable to growth in discipleship is vital for Christians growing in faith. Accountability was a distinctive characteristic of the Wesleyan revival in the early 1700’s and will be vital to a current revival within The United Methodist Church.

Application and relevance to the United Methodist Church

Watson makes direct reference to the application and relevance of this topic to The United Methodist Church.

“This paper has argued that the keys to the renewal of the United Methodist Church are found in its Wesleyan heritage, which primarily consists of a doctrinal emphasis on scriptural holiness and a disciplinary insistence on the need for Methodists to “watch over one another in love” (Watson, 20). “The UMC, as it seeks to be faithful to its mission, faces the challenge of helping its members value self-denial and suffering in the Christian life as they seek to enter through the ‘narrow door’ of Christian discipleship” (Watson, 21-2).

While Wesleyan doctrine has been maintained in the Book of Discipline, the practice of discipline in the Wesleyan movement has been lost through wide portions of the denomination. I believe that the themes of this paper are applicable to congregations throughout The United Methodist Church. In applying the themes of this paper to The United Methodist Church, there may be a role for the general boards and agencies. However, I agree with Watson:

“Surely Wesley would insist that revitalizing small group accountability is the responsibility of every local church, not just the responsibility of a board or agency. He would also insist that growing in holiness is the responsibility of every Christian, it is not just the responsibility of an elite few” (Watson, 13).

Application and relevance to The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection

The Form and Power of Godliness has application and relevance to The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection. At Resurrection, we are building a Christian community where non-religious and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians. The connection of faith and action is an integral part of this purpose. This connection can take place worship by giving people tangible ways to respond in their lives and in the world. This connection can also be facilitated by reminding those serving as a part of short or long term mission teams that our action flows from our faith.

Through conversations with members of the discipleship team, it is my understanding that the team is currently exploring what may be the most effective way to implement forms of small group accountability within the congregation. This may be a more intimate and intentional form of small group life than what is currently being lived out by some small groups within the congregation.

The renewal of the mainline church is a part of Resurrection’s vision. Living out the call to accountability and self-denial in this paper could be a part of living into that vision. Renewal of denominations begins one congregation at a time.

Bibliography

Watson, Kevin. The Form and Power of Godliness: Wesleyan Communal Discipline as Voluntary Suffering. 42nd Annual Meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society. March 1-3, 2007. http://wesley.nnu.edu/wts/42_annual_meeting/papers/ [The Form and Power of Godliness Kevin M. Watson 42nd WTS Meeting.pdf](http://wesley.nnu.edu/wts/42nd_WTS_Meeting.pdf)