

Would Wesley Be Surprised?

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Wesley has surprised me repeatedly. He surprised me when I first studied him in seminary in Cuba. From what I had heard of him, I expected a fiery, hardly rational preacher, with little concern over theological matters. Instead, I found a careful theologian who could develop a tightly reasoned argument against Roman Catholic, Calvinistic, or Moravian doctrine and practice. Then, almost immediately, he surprised me again by showing an almost incredible tolerance and even appreciation for those with whom he strongly disagreed. For instance, after

reading his letter to William Law, sternly reproaching him for not having spoken more clearly of the grace of God in his very popular book, he amazed me by including that very book in his "Christian Library" that he invited every devout Christian to read.

I was a senior in seminary when Wesley surprised me again. I was encouraged by a professor to do a study on the sources of Wesley's theology, and fully expected to find such sources to be Luther, Calving, Cranmer, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the like. But then I find that, besides such obvious and expected sources, Wesley had drunk deeply from the wells of ancient Christian theology and, even more surprisingly, those wells included Eastern theologians of whom I knew very little and to whom Wesley introduced me. Indeed, I eventually came to the conclusion that one of the reasons why there has been so much misunderstanding of Wesley's doctrine of perfection is that most interpreters have read it within a purely Western frame of mind.

Years later, as I began looking retrospectively at my own spiritual and theological journey, Wesley surprised me for what I thought would be the last time, as I began to discover how much of my spirituality and theological outlook had been shaped by this eighteenth-century man whom I so often discounted as the founder of a denomination to which I happened to belong. As I began doing an inventory of my own stances on a number of issues, I repeatedly found John Wesley looming behind me, as my spiritual and theological ancestor in ways I

had not suspected. Although not always as successfully as could be expected, I had long sought to join theology with practice, learning with piety, tradition with contemporary obedience, careful theological inquiry with a sense of the mystery and the limits of all theological statements, Protestant conviction with Catholic inclusivity. . . And now I had to acknowledge that in all this and much more, I had been doing little more than trying to live up to my Wesleyan heritage. Once again, Wesley had caught me unawares!

Now, most recently, Wesley is surprising me once again. A few years ago, I took up the challenge of editing a Spanish translation of Wesley's works. Until then, all that existed in Spanish was Wesley's treatise of Christian perfection, and a nineteenth-century translation of the Standard Sermons. Our enterprise, inspired and supported by the Wesley Heritage Foundation, would include fourteen volumes. I undertook this task with the full expectation that we were producing these volumes as a long-term contribution to Spanish-language studies on Wesley. These books were to be placed in strategically important theological libraries in Latin America and elsewhere, and there they would rest until some particularly energetic student decided to use them for a research paper, much as I had used the works of Luther when I was in seminary. At least, that was my expectation. . .

Once again, Wesley has surprised me. The books I had expected to sit in libraries, waiting for an occasional scholar to open, I have found in a Nazarene

Bible institute in Chile, in a Pentecostal pastor's study in Puerto Rico, and on a Methodist pastor's desk in Cuba. A study guide to Wesley's *Obras* has been issued, and all over the Spanish-speaking world people with all sorts of denominational and educational background are seriously reading and studying Wesley. They are Wesley's spiritual and theological heirs, even if until very recently they had at best a dim consciousness of it.

This is no small matter when one considers that it is precisely the vast Wesleyan family—not only those who still carry the names of "Methodist" and "Wesleyan," but also the various Holiness churches and the Pentecostals stemming from a Wesleyan tradition—that has suddenly attained explosive growth in Latin America, to the point that in several countries they have come to challenge the Roman Catholic Church as boasting the most numerous membership.

How is it that the legacy of a long dead, white, English-speaking man—and a conservative royalist at that!—holds such attraction for so many people, many of whom, though his heirs, had never heard of him?

One reason may be that Wesley himself was interested in Spanish culture and the Spanish spiritual heritage. Just a few days after beginning to study Spanish, he translated a poem by a Spanish mystic. He always showed great admiration for Gregory López, whom he considered "much mistaken" because he was a Roman Catholic, yet "good and wise" and "truly religious." In a passage that shows both his appreciation of Spanish and his anti-Scottish and anti-French prejudices, he declared that, after reading what was considered a French literary masterpiece by Voltaire, he had come to the conclusion that French "is no more comparable to the German or Spanish, than a bag-pipe is to an organ."

Therefore, one could argue that one of the reasons why Wesley proves so attractive to the Spanish-speaking world is that he absorbed some of the traditional religiosity that stands at the heart of Iberian culture, and that he therefore presents us with a perspective on the gospel that, while thoroughly Protestant, Anglican, and Evangelical, also touches the deep roots of Latin-American Catholic spirituality.

There are, however, at least two other points at which Wesley proves valuable for Latin American Protestantism today. The first of these has to do with his attitude toward social and political issues. Just about everyone in Latin America who has heard about John Wesley knows that he was a royalist who opposed American independence, and that he was a staunch defender of royal authority. But now they read his own words on the matter, and discover that Wesley

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opposed the colonial call for freedom, not only because it was against the king, but also and foremost because the very colonials who demanded liberty for themselves also defended their "right" to hold slaves. People read his criticism of British colonial policy in India, and this encourages those who feel the need to critique and resist the policies of twenty-first-century neo-colonialism and economic globalization. His analysis of the reasons why food had become so expensive in eighteenth-century England sounds tragically contemporary in lands where economic globalization has brought greater national wealth and much poverty among the population. And all of this carries much more weight precisely because Wesley was a conservative and a royalist! In all these matters, Wesley proves to be an attractive paradigm in a context in which social, political, and economic attitudes on the part

of Christians, even when defended in the name of the gospel, so often turn out to be quite predictable on social and political grounds.

The second point at which Wesley proves to be particularly relevant for the church in today's Spanish-speaking world—and most likely for the entire church—is the place he gives to theology in the life of the church. Spanish-speaking Protestantism seems to be sharply divided between those who insist on detailed orthodoxies—most of them inherited from various missionary enterprises and transplanted to the foreign soil of Latin America—and those who seem to have decided that theology and doctrine are of little importance, for all we are to do is "preach the gospel." In such a situation, Wesley comes as a challenge to both sides. His careful discussion of points of doctrine seems very appropriate to some, who are then challenged by the many manifestations of what Wesley would call his "catholic spirit." And those who immediately and too easily approve of his catholic spirit are baffled by the careful attention he gives to theological debate and to the defense of orthodoxy. In reading Wesley, we are thus confronted with a "third way"—one which is not an easy *via media* nor a mere compromise, but which rather takes the values of both positions seriously, and challenges both of them.

In an entirely different setting, and with a different purpose, Wesley declared that the world was his parish. I suspect that he would have been even more surprised than I am upon discovering that his theology, his piety, and his praxis are so relevant in this world of ours, which is increasingly becoming a global parish! □



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