

The Debate on the Necessity of Church Buildings Through the Lens of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

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In recent years, a debate has arisen in the Christian church regarding whether or not a congregation needs to possess its own physical building to fully respond to the call of the church.¹ In 2009, an article series in *Christianity Today* featured two writers representing both sides of this issue. Dan Kimball wrote, “If you had asked me eight years ago what I thought about the church buildings, I would have said, ‘Who needs a building?’...But I was wrong.”² Kimball then described the outreach his church had accomplished and asserted that “these missional opportunities would not be possible without a building.”³ In response, Ken Eastburn authored an article in *Christianity Today* proposing that Kimball’s new mindset is incorrect: “It is our consumer-mentality that causes us to think we need buildings. Buildings can be great tools, but the Church gets by...no, the church thrives...every day without them.”⁴ This debate has taken hold of Christian churches and affects the very roots of their ministry. Yet, when compared, the arguments against using a permanent building outweigh the arguments for a building. In the final analysis, buildings are superfluous to the church’s identity and function. The Christian church

¹ For example, arguments for having a building are advanced by Adam Delaplaine, “3 Reasons a Congregation Should Have Its Own Building,” *New Life Presbyterian Church Blog*, May 2014., accessed 19 March 2017, www.newlifepca.org/3-reasons-congregation-building/. For arguments against having a building, see “Churches Shouldn’t Spend So Much Money on Buildings,” *Debate.org*, March 2014, <http://www.debate.org/debates/Churches-Shouldnt-Spend-So-Much-Money-on-Buildings/1/>.

² Dan Kimball, “I Was Wrong About Church Buildings,” *Christianity Today*, December 2009, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2009/december-online-only/i-was-wrong-about-church-buildings.html>. See also Delaplaine, “3 Reasons.”

³ Dan Kimball, “I Was Wrong.”

⁴ Ken Eastburn, “Wrong About Church Buildings 2: A Response to Dan Kimball,” *Christianity Today*, December 2009, accessed 7 May 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2009/december-online-only/wrong-about-church-buildings-2.html>. (Ellipsis marks in original.)

does not consist of the building, but rather is defined by the individuals who come together as one in the body of Christ.

Despite the modern context of this argument, one of the best ways to evaluate the debate is to learn from the roots of Christian church history. The history of the Methodist Church offers a rich and timeless resource in the evaluation of John Wesley's leadership. Wesley built his primary ministry strategy around a circuit-riding network structure. In other words, he and other preachers travelled by horseback to designated regions around England, holding services in public squares, fields, and even individual homes.⁵ Wesley found great success in operating without a building. Wesley not only provides a precedent for a non-building-centered outreach but also established a method of theological reflection as a conduit for decision-making, best known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral—a method that can be adopted to address the church building debate.

In 1972, Albert Outler's construction of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral appeared in the *Discipline* of the United Methodist Church.⁶ Outler developed this construction based on his study of John Wesley's approach to "theological reflection"; the method rests on four main aspects—scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.⁷ Wesley began by using scripture because he insisted that the Word of God was and is the primary authority in Christian doctrine. He then employed tradition, which includes the history of the church, faith, or the entirety of Christianity as a lens for evaluation. Experience is based on the observations of past experience by the church and humanity in general. Finally, reason is the recognition that God's will for the question at hand might be sought by applying logic and reasoning. Just as Wesley utilized this method of theological reflection to discern God's will during his ministry, it can also be used to evaluate today's church building discussion.

Overall, the arguments for a dedicated building⁸ are weighty. Scripture recognizes the Solomonic temple's pivotal role in worship.⁹ Church tradition reveals the identification of church buildings with Christian practices and membership: "the church" became a means of describing the building, not the members.¹⁰ Moreover, experience and reason highlight the benefits of a central location and neutral space.

In contradistinction, elements of the Quadrilateral also argue against using a dedicated building. Scripture notes the importance of Christ's sacrifice as the final bridge closing the gap between God and man, undercutting the purpose of the temple.¹¹

⁵ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 162.

⁶ Andrew C. Thompson, "Outler's Quadrilateral, Moral Psychology, and Theological Reflection in the Wesleyan Tradition," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46, no. 1 (2011): 49.

⁷ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), ¶105.

⁸ For this debate, a "building" will be considered a permanent structure that the congregation has either purchased, built, or leased. In these cases, congregations are in charge of the financial and physical upkeep of the building. On the other hand, "without a building" refers to a congregation that utilizes public spaces or individual houses for the church's needs.

⁹ E.g., 2 Kings 6:19.

¹⁰ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 97-108.

¹¹ E.g., Ephesians 2:19-22.

Tradition documents the history of successful itinerant ministries,¹² as well as the financial difficulties of a permanent building. Finally, experience and reason warn of the distraction and loss of ministerial focus that inherently come with building use.¹³

Scripture

Historically, the Israelites were required to have a building solely dedicated to God's presence. Exodus 40:34-35 describes the structure: "Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." Therefore, early scripture recognizes the need for a space designed not only for the meeting of individuals but also for the recognition of God's holy presence.¹⁴ Further support for this argument is found in 2 Kings 6:19: "And he prepared the inner sanctuary inside the temple, to set the ark of the covenant of the Lord there." The ark of the covenant was a small gilded monument that was carried with the Israelites during their time in the desert. For them, it represented the presence of God and was placed in the inner sanctuary because of its holiness. With this in mind, many would argue that the core value of a church building is inherent in the scriptural need for a holy place, as described by these Old Testament passages.

Though some scriptural passages support having a building, other passages reject it. Wesley referred to Luke 14:23 as encouragement for ministry that does not require a building. This verse reads, "Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.'" In this case, Wesley defined "house" as the comprehensive body of Christ or the Christian faith; he was not directly referring to the "house" as being the church building.¹⁵ Furthermore, in a sermon on Ephesians 4, Wesley expanded on his interpretation of the church itself, arguing that the church is not a building, but "the 'church' is... a congregation or body of people united together in the service of God."¹⁶ Wesley also used scripture to structure his small group ministry.

One of the most important facets of Wesley's circuit-riding ministry was the development of "classes" in the cities where he ministered. These classes were structured into what modern-day churches would consider "small groups." In his book *Fire of Love*, Gordon Wakefield describes how Wesley's intention for the groups was that they meet and conduct self-led discussions on their weekly experiences, scripture, and local developments.¹⁷ While planning the format for his small classes, Wesley utilized the book of James as a guideline for their day-to-day operation. In describing how the small groups should meet, he specifically cited a passage in James 5:16 as guidance for starting each

¹² Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 103-104.

¹³ See discussion below.

¹⁴ James F. White, *Introduction*, 89.

¹⁵ John Wesley, "Of the Church," quoted in Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 174.

¹⁶ Wesley, "Of the Church," quoted in Outler, ed., *John Wesley*, 308.

¹⁷ Gordon Wakefield, *Fire of Love: The Spirituality of John Wesley* (New Canaan: Keats Publishing, 1977), 41.

meeting¹⁸: “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” Wesley’s use of scripture in the formation of these classes played a key role in his mobile ministry and in the development of its framework. For Wesley, the practices of the group were of central importance, not the space in which it met.

Finally, it is worth noting a passage in Matthew that does not support scriptural argument for a sanctified space. As mentioned above, many Old Testament passages refer to the need for this unique space; however, Matthew 27:51 reads, “Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked and the rocks were split.” Solomon’s Temple was constructed with an inner sanctuary called the Holy of Holies, which was separated by a veil and said to be where the presence of God resided. However, only the high priest could enter this sanctuary once a year for the atonement sacrifice, and anyone else who entered was killed. The passage in Matthew expresses a metaphor about Christ’s death: The veil of the temple can be interpreted as an Old Testament symbol for the metaphysical barrier that sin creates between God and humanity, which prohibits individuals from coming into God’s presence. With Christ’s sacrifice, this barrier was torn, and people can now experience God through Jesus. The temple is no longer one’s only access to God. Thus, the passage serves as a rebuttal to the argument that a sacred space is necessary for the recognition of God’s presence.

Tradition

Historically, the roots of the Christian church lie in Judaism. The Jewish synagogue was a place of worship and reverence. Initially, the synagogue was organized and run by the local community and served as the central location of outreach and care for the surrounding area.¹⁹ These synagogues were the main locations for Jewish worship, although, perhaps because of Roman persecution, those of Christian faith did not establish similar buildings in the earliest years of Christianity. It was not until Constantine’s rule in Byzantium that Christians began to break ground on construction of their own permanent buildings.²⁰ In addition, Constantine ordered that many preexisting pagan temples, such as the Pantheon in Rome, be converted to Christian worship centers. These early churches marked the start of the church building movement and the end of Christian persecution in the Byzantine empire.²¹ This pattern of ministry continued to grow and to give rise to specialized church buildings up through the times of Medieval and Early Reformation practices until the time of Wesley.²²

Furthermore, support for a church building can also be found in Wesley’s leadership experience. Though his ministry was primarily on the move, he reluctantly decided to build a church building in Bristol, England. Traditionally, Wesley enjoyed the freedom of preaching in public locations where he could not be “turned out,” locations

¹⁸ Wakefield, *Fire*.

¹⁹ Eric M. Meyers, “Synagogue,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 6: 252.

²⁰ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, revised edition (Peabody: Prince Press, 2007), 93.

²¹ Latourette, *History*, 92.

²² White, *Introduction*, 97-108.

such as parks, markets, or even cemeteries. However, the Methodist classes that met in Bristol “began to outgrow the homes in which they met.”²³ With this new development, the local societies—or collections of classes—decided to purchase land for a building. Fearing a potential loss of ministerial control, Wesley assumed financial responsibility for the project, “heeding [George] Whitfield’s warning that if he didn’t, [church] trustees could turn him out of the building if they didn’t like his preaching.”²⁴ Humorously, this meant that Wesley was now threatened with the possibility of truly being “turned out.” Although Wesley relinquished his freedom to preach in a variety of locations, the developments in Bristol indicate that, above a certain population, congregations are inclined to want a dedicated building in order to formally meet.

Nonetheless, resistance to the notion that a dedicated building is necessary persisted throughout Christian history, having begun even in Jesus’s time, when the initial ministry by the apostles and first followers of Christ took place in homes instead of central church buildings. These house churches were likely set up by the apostle Paul in his early ministry when he, “usually with one or more companions, carried the Christian message into much of Asia Minor and into Macedonia and Greece.”²⁵ After Paul set this standard, the early church members continued to meet in homes, catacombs, and other such spaces, holding “their services either secretly or without public announcement”²⁶ until Constantine’s building campaign commenced. Yet Paul’s pattern of meeting in existing, undedicated buildings continued even up to Wesley’s time. Both John Wesley and Paul had similar outreach formats that required them to travel around the surrounding country and establish house churches or small classes. And, as evidenced by their respective ministries, these forms of ministry without dedicated church buildings were highly successful in their own times,²⁷ so much so that the forms were carried on after Wesley’s time and are still applicable to present generations.

Today, many churches have encountered challenges with their buildings, and even John Wesley himself experienced the difficulty of managing a building in ministry. At one point, the debt of the building in Bristol became the primary concern of the small group meetings, overriding their regular meeting activities: “The debt on the New Room was being discussed at Bristol... Captain Foy, proposed each member of the society should give a penny a week toward clearing it.”²⁸ The financial pressure is one fundamental problem that challenges the argument for purchasing a building once the congregation exceeds its holding capacity. Alternatives to purchasing a building include utilizing public spaces or splitting the congregation into smaller groups. Wesley witnessed firsthand the financial difficulty of a dedicated building and recalled that “it was pointed out that a penny a week was beyond the means of many members.”²⁹ The focus of the ministry was taken away from the development of the body of Christ among the believers and put on the discharge of the debt incurred for the physical building. This

²³ Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 103.

²⁴ Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 104.

²⁵ Latourette, *History*, 73.

²⁶ Latourette, *History*, 81.

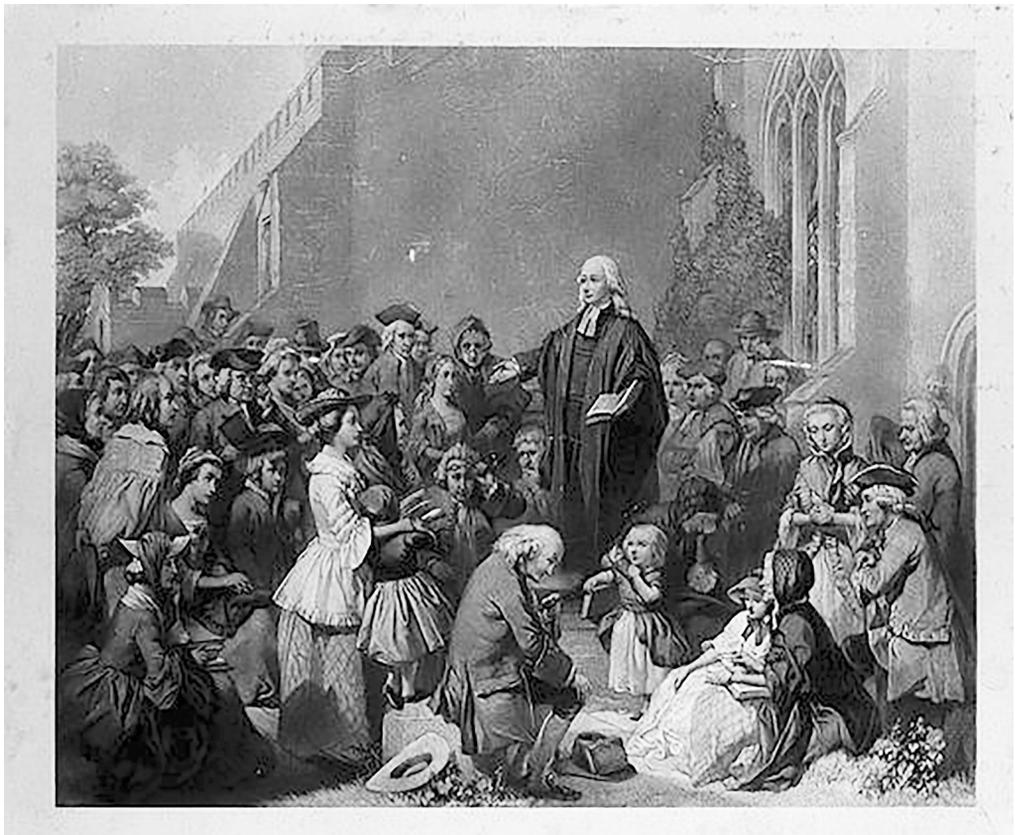
²⁷ Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 306.

²⁸ David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 93.

²⁹ Watson, *Class Meeting*, 93.

was one of the nightmares that Wesley wanted to avoid in his ministry, yet unfortunately his fears became all too real.

Although Wesley finally purchased a building, the dedicated building was a concept that contradicted his model of outreach. Wesley was a circuit rider by nature, but his dedication to this ministry model was not strong enough to oppose the desires of his church in Bristol. He acquiesced to help purchase the building in Bristol only after he felt threatened with a loss of control of his own ministry; he feared that, if he did not have some degree of ownership in the building, “trustees could turn him out of the building if they didn’t like his preaching.”³⁰ Additionally, though most ministers in his time were dedicated to a specific parish in the Church of England, Wesley thought quite the opposite: “Wesley felt that his calling as well as his ordination made it necessary for him to disregard parish boundaries and normal parish protocol in his attempts to fulfill God’s commission to him to preach the gospel”; as he proclaimed “the world is my parish.”³¹



John Wesley preaching outside a church, n.d. Engraving by unknown artist. Wellcome Library photo number V0006868.

This mentality does not support the purchase of a building as Wesley did not see God’s outreach as being limited by a physical building. Indeed, not only has Wesley’s ministry

³⁰ Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 103.

³¹ Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 102.

extended beyond the land in which he preached, but it has also reached across the confines of time and impacts those of Christian faith today.

Experience and Reason³²

One of the most important benefits of having a permanent building is the establishment of a permanent location. With this, members of the church have a specific, central place that they identify as a common ground, or as Pastor Amanda Garber³³ describes it, a “home base.”³⁴ Also, potential members who are interested in coming to the church have a distinct location. This also creates a focal point for community outreach. For example, in a disaster situation, the community can more efficiently reach out to a church if it has a permanent building. Finally, this permanent location typically allows for more versatility in outreach options. A church with a permanent location may be able to host outreach such as youth sports programs, lock-ins, worship nights, etc. It is unlikely that these events would be possible without a dedicated building.

Unlike a house church, a permanent building is typically larger and allows newcomers to attend a church anonymously before committing. Typically, a small house church creates an intimate setting that makes it difficult for potential members to take advantage of the anonymity that a large building provides.³⁵ Also, house churches remove the neutrality of a gathering place. Since services or meetings are conducted in the house of a certain member, they occur in a non-neutral space. For example, if one member has a personal conflict with the house host member, it would distract from or even damage the relationship that member has with the rest of the congregation. Similarly, the host members may become distracted with the worry or concern that they need to be proper hosts in their own home for the rest of the members. In contrast, the permanent building becomes a neutral, anonymous space where members do not feel pressured as they might in the house church setting. Finally, a church building typically creates a space that feels sacred, or designed for worship. Churches based in houses or other rented buildings will not have the aesthetics or design that allow them to be designated worship places.

Among the three religious leaders interviewed by the author, all emphatically noted one problem that comes with a church building: loss of focus. Wesley encountered the same problem with the church in Bristol. The congregation inevitably becomes distracted with financial or managerial problems because of the building. Marty Cauley³⁶ explains this problem in today’s churches: “The mission of the church then shifts from

³² According to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, experience and reason require personal reflections on the “full range of human knowledge, experience, and service” (*The Book of Discipline*, ¶104). Thus, the author conducted three interviews to acquire input from ministers presently working firsthand in the ministry field.

³³ Amanda Garber is the pastor of RISE, a United Methodist faith community in Harrisonburg, Virginia, that was started in 2010 in the basement of a Mediterranean restaurant. Amanda Garber, phone conversation with the author, April 12, 2016.

³⁴ Amanda Garber, phone conversation with the author, April 12, 2016.

³⁵ Amanda Garber, phone conversation with the author, April 12, 2016.

³⁶ Marty Cauley is the Director of Content and Coaching for the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church, and oversees church planting in eastern/central North Carolina. Marty Cauley, email message to author, April 9, 2016.

being externally focused, reaching & serving the local community, to internally focused, maintaining and caring for the facility.”³⁷ In addition to loss of focus, oftentimes congregations will find that maintaining a building is too expensive, which again draws attention away from outreach and toward the sustainment of the property. Over time, churches can lose sight of their mission of fortifying the body of Christ and begin to focus on the mission of constructing the building instead.

Though centrality and neutrality may be attractive for some churchgoers, one study conducted by Charles Arn in 2009 indicates that, over the past ten years, 75 to 90 percent of his respondents started going to church for a different reason: “The friendship factor”; Arn notes that “[t]hose friends and relatives are critical to the growth of churches. They far outweigh factors like the facilities, music, preaching, or children’s ministry... .”³⁸ A keystone element of a smaller congregation is the ability to initiate and maintain personal relationships with visitors and members. And while churches with larger buildings may be able to hold more members in attendance, more people come and remain at church because of the relationships that are built more easily in small church settings.

Additionally, this small church model is starting to grow around the world, not just in popularity but also diversity. Mark Ogren³⁹ describes a new ministry that is taking shape around the world and emphasizing the belief that “the church is not a building... church is the body of Christ.”⁴⁰ Fresh Expressions is an outreach that began in the Church of England in 2004 in Britain, and since then has spread to the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and other places around the world.⁴¹ This outreach is a house church movement that focuses on gathering people of similar interests, goals, and ideas. There are surfer churches, cowboy churches, artsy churches, nature churches. Anything that might bring people together in Christ can be used as a focal point for a church as long as it meets certain criteria. Fresh Expressions articulates on its website four guiding principles that must be a part of each church in order for it to be considered part of Fresh Expressions: The church must be missional by reaching out to people who are not being served by any church at the time; it must be contextual, or focused on the culture and language of the people it is trying to reach; it must be formational, that is, focused on bringing people to Jesus; and it must be ecclesial, which means forming tangible Christian communities that can be set apart as churches in their own right.⁴² All of these aspects are essential to the house church movement, and all harken back to the ministry that John Wesley started in the 1700s.

³⁷ Marty Cauley, email message to author, April 9, 2016, available from the author.

³⁸ Rachel Willoughby, “3 Questions for Charles Arn,” *Christianity Today* (March 2009), n.p., accessed 30 January 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2009/march-online-only/3-questions-for-charles-arn.html>.

³⁹ Mark Ogren is the Director of Congregational Excellence for the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church, and he is responsible for church planting and development in Virginia. Mark Ogren, email message to author, April 8, 2016.

⁴⁰ Mark Ogren, email message to author, April 8, 2016.

⁴¹ “About—What Is a Fresh Expression?,” *Fresh Expressions US*, 2017, <http://freshexpressionsus.org/about/#what>.

⁴² “About.”

Conclusion

John Wesley's leadership model has a bearing on this debate. An assessment with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in mind leads to the conclusion that the movement away from a permanent building to a church model without buildings will be of paramount importance to the advancement of the body of Christ in the world. Since support for both sides of the argument can be found by applying the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the usefulness of church buildings cannot be completely dismissed. For some situations, buildings are useful; however, buildings can also limit ministry in a multitude of ways. As scripture, church history, and experience show, the Spirit of God is found flowing in the hearts of the faithful and not locked within the walls of a building. By removing the building and focusing on edifying the people, ministry can grow in a more personal way. Finally, without a building, people no longer "go to" their church, but rather they can "be part of" their church. In Christian belief, they then become part of the body of Christ. Indeed, this was the message that John Wesley, the apostle Paul, and Christ Himself set out to spread in ministry, crossing the borders of nations and the expanse of time.

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