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# "Priests are obliged to be turbulent": The continuing relevance of Charles Villa-Vicencio's liberative Methodist theology[1]

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**Abstract**

Charles Villa-Vicencio's theology developed in the context of the struggle against Apartheid is interpreted as a transposition of key themes from the Methodist theological tradition into a liberative key. This is takes place through Villa-Vicencio's expansion of the notion of salvation and his affirmation of the preferential option for the poor. The article examines the significance of this in relation to the themes of grace and responsibility, the renewal of the church, and resistance to oppression. It argues that this transposition continues to have significance for contemporary Methodist theology and needs to be critically and constructively recovered.

**Keywords**

*Charles Villa-Vicencio; Methodist Theology; Liberation Theology; Wesleyan Theology; Anti-apartheid Theology*

Charles Villa-Vicencio, a Methodist pastor and theology professor during the height of Apartheid, was actively engaged in the struggle against Apartheid in the public protest, in the church, and in supporting the underground struggle.[2] He was a "turbulent priest". While he later left the ministry and the church his numerous writings from this time continue to

1 I had the privilege of studying under Charles Villa-Vicencio and working as his teaching and research assistant. This article is a small token of gratitude for what I learnt from him and for his support for me as a young academic even when we had major theological disagreements.

2 See his autobiographical reflections in Villa-Vicencio 2015.

provide a profound challenge to Methodist theology today.[3] Villa-Vicencio would probably be the first to reject the description of his theology as particularly "Methodist". As he proposed: "Methodists are called to be Christians not Methodists." (Villa-Vicencio 1982:91) While there is validity in such a response, I argue that aspects of his theology can be understood to transpose aspects of the Methodist tradition into a new key which is characterised by "an unexpected change … which may suggest a basic *discontinuity* between what came before and what comes afterward" and yet "with retrospective discernment we … discover some continuity even within the discontinuity" (McAfee Brown 1978:23).

## Charles Villa-Vicencio on Wesleyan Theology

In his major works Charles Villa-Vicencio enters into dialogue with significant theologians of the past as sources for countering the evils of apartheid. We find numerous references to Luther, Calvin, and Barth, but very few to John Wesley. This is not to say that he was not familiar with Wesley – he wrote two major articles on Methodism with a focus on John Wesley – but he did not find many useful resources in Wesley's theology for the theological struggle against apartheid. The two articles, "The Origins and Witness of Methodism" (Villa-Vicencio 1982) and "Towards a Liberating Wesleyan Social Ethic" (Villa-Vicencio 1989a), are particularly critical of Wesley but at the same time identify important theological themes that Villa-Vicencio affirms and proposes to be useful resources for the development of a liberatory Methodist theology that rejects an exclusive Wesleyanism. For Villa-Vicencio, Wesley's importance stems from the significant influence of Methodism in South Africa. However, he proposed that Wesley was "an eighteenth-century bourgeois preacher, entrenched in his support of the Tory party, who shared in the stabilising of an exploitative economic system torn to breaking point by the impact

3 The focus of this article is on Villa-Vicencio's theological writings during the struggle against Apartheid with some brief references to his writing during the political transition (Villa-Vicencio 1992a). The latter is significant in his move from a focus on liberation to a liberative theology of reconstruction, but constraints of length require a more limited focus. A further important area of study would be to examine the theological influences in his later non-theological writings and his return to engage theological and religious topics (Villa-Vicencio 2021).

of the Industrial Revolution". (Villa Vicencio 1989a:92) This portrait was strongly influenced by the work of Elie Halevy, E.J. Hobsbawm, and E.P. Thompson.[4]

The evaluation of Villa-Vicencio's account of Wesley's political views and influence lies beyond the scope of this article,[5] but it is important to understand Villa-Vicencio's interpretation of Wesley's theology and ethics as being a form of political conservatism (that is supporting the established political order), and of liberal idealism (that is focusing on individual transformation and charity rather than radical socio-political transformation); he viewed this as being combined with an individualistic work ethic and an understanding of liberty based on the ownership of private property. Villa-Vicencio interpreted the theological roots of the Wesley's problematic views to lie in a soteriological individualism focused on saving souls, the lack of a comprehensive doctrine of creation, and an eschatology that was not integrated with creation or present salvation. Moreover, Wesley was shaped and to some extent entrapped by his own context as a bourgeois priest of the established church brought up in a family with strong Tory commitments. The adequacy of Villa-Vicencio's interpretation of Wesley's theology and its context is open to challenge, particularly in the light of research that has been published since he wrote these articles. Thus for example, Theodore Jennings work on Wesley's evangelical economics proposes a radical reinterpretation of Wesley's view of money and property (Jennings 1990); Theodore Runyon's work on Wesley's understanding of the new creation argues that Wesley's understanding of the salvation of the soul must be understood as participation in God's eschatological renewal of creation (Runyon 1998); and various studies on Wesley's engagement in the struggle against slavery show that on this issue Wesley was prepared to support radical socio-economic measures. (Brendlinger 2006; Field 2021). While none of these studies present Wesley as a liberative theologian they do suggest there are resources in Wesley for the development of a liberative theology not used by Villa-Vicencio.[6]

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4 See Halevy 1924, Hobsbawm 1957, and Thompson 1968.

5 For critiques of the perspectives of Halevy, Hobsbawm, and Thompson see Hempton 1984:20-54 and Weber 2001:41-154.

6 One attempt to do constructively and critically use sources from Wesley for a liberative theology is the work of Joerg Rieger; see Rieger 2011 and 2018.

Despite his critique of Wesley and early methodism, Villa-Vicencio would propose in his reflection on the task of theology in a post-apartheid context that "[t]he Wesleyan revival … addressed social renewal with a sense of vigour that can scarcely be ignored in present attempts to address nation building from a theological perspective" (Villa-Vicencio 1992a:13). He had earlier posed the question: "Can we construct a Wesleyan ethic for our time and place which explores the liberative dimensions of Wesley's teaching …?" (Villa-Vicencio 1989a:97). It is my argument that Villa-Vicencio's work proposes and suggests important ways in which this can be done, even when he is not directly reflecting on Wesleyan theology.

## Moving beyond Wesley

Villa-Vicencio's liberative reinterpretation and rearticulating of Methodist theology is centred on two theological moves. The first is an expansion of the meaning of salvation and the second is the affirmation of the theological priority of the poor and oppressed.

### Expanding the interpretation of salvation

Wesley's understanding of salvation is focused on the salvation of the individual understood as acceptance by God (justification) and the transformation of the person leading to a life of love for God and neighbour (sanctification). The emphasis on sanctification reintegrates works of righteousness into salvation but these are largely focused on individual acts. Wesley argued that through the holy lives of Christians and communal embodiment of love in the church the society would be transformed. For Villa-Vicencio it is precisely such an individualised interpretation of salvation that prevented many South Africa Christians from active involvement in the struggle against apartheid. (Villa-Vicencio n.d.:31)

In contrast to Wesley, Villa-Vicencio argues that: "The New Testament message of salvation is broad and inclusive (Villa-Vicencio 1989:12). Like Wesley, he critiqued a narrow focus on justification by faith (Villa-Vicencio 1985b) and affirmed Wesley's emphasis on sanctification as an integral aspect of the gospel, but he viewed both traditional Protestantism's focus on justification and Wesley's integrated understanding of justification and

sanctification as too individually focused. He argued that understanding of the gospel that separates the "spiritual" from the socio-political and economic dimensions of life is "pagan where it seeks to be most pious. It leaves God without a world and the world in the hands of sinful men without God." (Villa-Vicencio n.d.:31) There is a need to move beyond an individualistic interpretation of salvation to embrace other communal and cosmic symbols of salvation found in the bible (Villa-Vicencio 1985:381 & 382). Villa-Vicencio constructed his alternative view by arguing that the biblical traditions portray God as the liberating presence who is encountered in diverse contexts of suffering and oppression in all dimensions of life drawing people to new experiences of holistic "liberation from both the internal egocentric and the external structural forms of sinful oppression" (Villa-Vicencio 1988a:199). This message is witnessed to in the exodus narratives, proclaimed in the Old Testament prophets call for of justice for the oppressed, and announced in the ministry and message of Jesus. Jesus preached "a revolutionary gospel" (Villa-Vicencio 1992b:21) that announced the reversal of the dominant hierarchical social structures, economic transformation in favour of the poor, and the inclusion of the socially and religiously excluded. "It [was] a message of good news to the poor, liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed and the announcement of the jubilee year" (Villa-Vicencio 1989:12). Thus, the salvation portrayed in the diverse biblical symbols can be described as the establishment of "human wholeness in all its possible dimensions" (Villa-Vicencio 1992a:23) this includes personal wholeness but goes far beyond it. It is "bringing creation to its full potential" (Villa-Vicencio 1989c:7-8), The gospel proclaims: "God's all-embracing grace that calls us to share in the recreative process of an entire world that is groaning in anticipation of liberation" (Villa-Vicencio 1989b:13-14.) This sharing "in the recreative process" includes resistance in the power of the divine Spirit to all that oppresses and dehumanises. (Villa-Vicencio 1990). This is not a bland universal message of human well-being. It is specific to particular contexts.

> Unless the gospel is incarnated and culturally adapted to the specific demands of specific situations, addressing the oppressive powers and principalities of those situations, and liberating peoples from the spiritual, socio-economic and political structures of oppression

> which characterise those situations it is not the gospel (Villa-Vicencio 1989b:15)

Thus, in the South Africa of the 1970's and 80's the gospel required a commitment to and a praxis of opposition to apartheid and support of the movements of liberation. This however did not mean the reduction of the gospel to political liberation or the identification of the gospel with the activities of particular liberation movements. Drawing particularly on Karl Barth's theology, Villa-Vicencio argued that the eschatological liberation proclaimed in the gospel always transcends any historical revolution judging it and drawing it to a fuller and more profound expressions of liberation. (Villa-Vicencio 1988b; 1989c)

**The preferential option for the poor**

Recent scholarship has emphasised that a particular focus on, solidarity with and engagement for the poor was an integral aspect of the ministry and ethics of John Wesley and the early Methodists. (Meeks 1995; Heitzenrater 2002). Wesley expressed sympathy with the struggles of the poor and condemned their exploitation. He went beyond this in his rejection of slavery and his affirmation to the resistance of enslaved people, and his support for the political struggle against slavery (Brendlinger 2006; Field 2021).[7] Yet the focus of Wesley and early Methodism was on spiritual rather than socio-political transformation. While Wesley expected that spiritual transformation would lead to socio-economic transformation, in practice the result was largely the "turning of the proletarians into the middle-class citizens" (Runyon 1985:9), rather than socio-economic revolution. A result witnessed to in Wesley's constant critique of the increasing wealth of Methodists.

Villa-Vicencio, like other liberation theologians, emphasises the "preferred option for the poor, the oppressed and other marginalised groups" (Villa-Vicencio 1989c:8) in a way which thoroughly radicalises Wesley's focus on the poor. Villa-Vicencio argues that the poor and marginalised are not "necessarily morally or spiritually 'better' than other classes" (Villa-Vicencio 1989c:8) The option for the poor is a theological statement; it is

7 It is noteworthy that apart from a passing reference Villa-Vicencio does not address Wesley's active opposition to slavers toward the end of his life.

the affirmation that God is in a particular way present amongst the poor and oppressed and is actively present in their struggles for liberation and justice. This is the implication of the parable of the sheep and the goats. "The poor discover within themselves and among their own the God of their salvation" (Villa-Vicencio 1990:122). Thus, the poor and oppressed become the agents of their own liberation, when they become "politically conscientized and empowered by the spirit of liberation (which Christians ascribe to the Spirit of God)," and "can acquire a single-minded commitment against which the iron gates of oppression cannot prevail" (Villa-Vicencio 1990:123). As such they are also the agent of the liberation of the comfortable classes of society. To the extent that the church is in captivity to the dominant classes, the poor preach the gospel to church calling the institutional church into solidarity with the poor, affirming that (at least in South Africa at the time) the majority of the members of the church are poor and oppressed people. When the church hears the gospel preached by the poor and oppressed it can become the agent of liberation. As the carrier of the gospel of liberation such a church plays a vital role in the struggle for liberation in that its calling is to ensure that the revolution always remains directed toward liberation of the poor and oppressed and does not become the vehicle for the creation of a new exploitative and oppressive class.

## Transposing Wesley

Villa-Vicencio's affirmation of a wholistic and liberative understanding of salvation and his emphasis on the preferential option for the poor are the means through which key Wesleyan theological themes are transposed.

### Grace and responsibility

As Villa-Vicencio notes, Wesley articulates in his understanding of salvation a dynamic dialectical understanding of grace and human responsibility,[8] but largely fails to do this in his understanding of God's providential working in society. He also refers to the underdeveloped potential of Wesley's theology of prevenient grace – though there are a

8 For a detailed exposition of this theme see Maddox 1994.

number of references in Wesley's writings, that Villa-Vicencio does not refer to, that imply a broader understanding prevenient grace at work in all societies promoting the establishment of justice, mercy, and truth (Field 2015a; 2021). Villa-Vicencio's work expands on this by its expansion of the understanding of salvation from Wesley's emphasis on individual forgiveness and transformation to the liberation and transformation of all areas of life. God's grace, which is for Villa-Vicencio a way of speaking of the liberating presence and activity of God, is present throughout human society but in a particular way amongst the poor and oppressed working for liberation from all forms of oppression and promoting human flourishing. From a Wesleyan perspective affirming that the grace of God is at work cannot remain a mere theological affirmation grace leads to action – faith leads to works. As Wesley comments in his sermon "On Working out our own Salvation":

> We shall then see there is no opposition between these – "God works; therefore, do we work;" – but, on the contrary, the closest connexion, and that in two respects. For, first, God works; therefore you *can* work. Secondly, God works, therefore you *must* work. (Wesley 1986:206)

Villa-Vicencio affirmed this, arguing that Christianity is about action; but this dynamic interaction of grace and works is not confined to personal salvation but is expressed in engagement for socio-political liberation. Because God is at work in all dimensions of life to bring about integral liberation so too must Christians be involved in all dimensions of life where oppressive forces are at work. "The heart of the Christian gospel is action-orientated with the essential goal of turning this world the right way up" (Villa-Vicencio 1998a:182) New Testament "faith involves a certain way of living. Never quietistic, it involves participation in building the kingdom of God on earth" (Villa-Vicencio 1998a:183). This is not a gospel of liberation by human effort because human action is a response to the mysterious liberating presence of God in society. Through such faithful praxis Christians participate in what God is doing in the world. As noted above this involves discerning in particular contexts where such forces are at work and hence where the church must be involved in responding to God's gracious work of liberation. In the context of Apartheid South

Africa this was a call to the church to commit itself to participation in the liberation struggle on the side of the oppressed black majority.

**Renewing the church**

John Wesley famously described the mission of Methodism as being "to reform the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land" (Wesley 2011:845). The reformation of the nation was dependent upon the reformation of the church and this reformation would be accomplished by spreading scriptural holiness over the land. In an analogous way, Villa-Vicencio was deeply concerned about the renewal of the church so that it might become an agent of liberation for the nation. Such a renewal would come about through a rediscovery of "scriptural holiness"; for both Wesley and Villa-Vicencio, scriptural holiness has to do with being transformed so that one loves one's neighbours as oneself. Yet here too Villa-Vicencio's understanding holiness and the renewal of the church is shaped by his understanding of salvation and the preferential option for the poor.

For both Villa-Vicencio and Wesley, the church had been corrupted by its compromise with the rich and powerful and both emphasised the decisive event being the so-called conversion of Constantine. Wesley emphasised that this resulted in the increasing wealth of the church, its captivity to the rich and powerful, and the resulting corruption (Wesley 1986:450). Villa-Vicencio emphasised the political nature of the compromise that the church became the church of the empire legitimating its dominating agenda. The church of the oppressed became the church of the oppressor. The renewal of the church thus for Wesley entails a return to "primitive Christianity" and for Villa-Vicencio the recovery of the message of the "poor man of Nazareth" who was crucified by the empire on a "charge of high treason" (Villa-Vicencio 1992b:21). For Wesley, a renewed church would become one which practiced the economic communalism of Acts amongst other things (Wesley 1984:171); for Villa-Vicencio, it would be one which becomes the church of the poor and oppressed and engages in the struggle for their liberation. Villa-Vicencio's renewed church would affirm the economic communalism of Wesley's "primitive Christianity" but would go beyond it in its engagement in a praxis of socio-political liberation. Wesley's commitment to the established Church of England and

his Tory politics prevented him from seeing the political dimensions of his rejection of the Constantinian settlement.

Villa-Vicencio's starting point for his interpretation of the renewal of the church is the affirmation that there are two churches. There is the dominant institutional church shaped by the social location of its predominant members, benefiting from the forces of the status quo, and trapped by them into political quietism in some cases, and in others into support of oppressive social systems. There is, however, an alternative church; this is a church of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalised "whose knowledge of Christ *is* through sharing in his suffering and in conformity to his death" (Villa-Vicencio 1988a:191). In many cases the dominant and the alternative church exist in the same institutional structure with the institutional power of the dominant groups and the rigidity of the bureaucratic structures, stifling the voice and influence of the alternative church. In the context of the struggle against apartheid Villa-Vicencio argued that this was the reason why the so-called English-speaking churches often protested against apartheid but failed to concretely commit themselves to the liberation struggle – they were "trapped in apartheid" (Villa-Vicencio 1988a). Yet he argued that "the resurrected Lord offers the entire church together with all creation the opportunity for renewal" (Villa-Vicencio 1988a:191).

The gospel requires that the institutional church acknowledges its captivity to the oppressive forces of the powerful and thus subject itself to "the purging grace and judgement of the gospel" (Villa-Vicencio 1988a:192). The same gospel proclaims that "Christ can renew his church". To deny the need and the possibility of the renewal of the church is to deny the gospel. To be renewed the church is called to hear the residual message of the gospel that remains within the dominant church, disturbingly reminding it of the life and message of the "poor man from Nazareth" who proclaimed that he is to be found amongst those who are the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the naked, the strangers, and the prisoners (Matt 25:31-46). This residual message is articulated in the cries of the poor and oppressed alternative church that remains a turbulent presence within the institutional church. For Villa-Vicencio, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats is a defining biblical text for the renewal of the church. This parable challenges the church to move beyond being the church for and with the poor to being the church of the poor – to recognise and affirm the alternative church within its

midst as the true church. This means institutional church must relocate itself amongst the poor, stand in solidarity with them, and participate in their struggle for liberation. It does so in the confession that, in the biblical witness, God is most profoundly revealed in the context of suffering and oppression, in the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt and in the crucifixion of Jesus the Christ. When the church locates itself amongst suffering humanity it participates in God's encounter with the world and in this way shares in God's liberative work.

The renewal of the church that emerges out of the re-location of the church involves the conversion of the dominant classes within the church. They are called in a new way to follow Jesus, to forsake their wealth and power, and to commit themselves to being with and for the poor and oppressed. This is not merely or even primarily a political conversion; it is a spiritual conversion. It is a process of encountering God in a new way as the liberating presence amongst the poor. It is a discovery of a new spirituality that is rooted in the experience of the poor and oppressed who have encountered God in the midst of their suffering as the sustaining, healing, empowering, and liberating presence. This leads to a rediscovery of worship as central to the life of the renewed church. Worship, not as the repetition of old liturgies, but as the place where the social and the spiritual are brought into relationship with each other. The place where the grace of God is experienced as the empowerment for the liberatory praxis.

The renewal of the institutional church will lead it liberate it from its entrapment to the dominant social forces. This will have three important consequences. It will move beyond political neutrality to take the side of the poor and oppressed. This does not mean the identification of the church with a particular political party or ideology, for the gospel always transcends and critiques particular ideologies, calling them all to greater conformity to God's eschatological reign. But it does mean, in particular situations, making concrete political choices, announcing God's moment of judgment, grace, and opportunity. This taking the side of the poor and oppressed is not the neglect of the rich and powerful but is to call them to repentance and transformation. Secondly, it is a move beyond bourgeoise realism, that is a "realism" which evaluates what is possible in relation to the interests and priorities of the beneficiaries of the dominant social order. Rather, it is a call for a praxis shaped by what is new, unexpected,

and visionary. "[T]he single most important service which the church can render the poor is to provide an alternative vision of what by God's grace is socially possible" (Villa-Vicencio 1990:141). This is the transposition of the Wesleyan optimism of grace from the personal and spiritual to the political and socio-economic realm. The third consequence is moving beyond protest to active engagement in the struggle for liberation and active resistance to forces of oppression and exploitation. This is does not mean that the church becomes the tool of secular political activists but rather that the church rediscovers "its own true revolutionary identity". This rediscovery "constitutes the major contribution of the church to the present age" (Villa-Vicencio 1990:142).

**Resisting oppression**

Wesley's attitude to state authorities is complex and not always consistent (See Weber 2001), however in one aspect is reasonably consistent. Wesley argued that the authority of governments comes from God and human beings are to obey them out of their obedience to God; this however did not mean unquestioning obedience, even though his rhetoric seems in some places to imply this. For Wesley, obedience to God was the ultimate priority, as a consequence of this primary obedience Christians ought to obey human laws that are expressions of the commandments of God because they are commanded by God whether or not governments command them. Because God has established governments Christians are to obey laws in matters that are religiously and ethically indifferent. However, when governing authorities require that which is contrary to the will of God then Christians have a duty to disobey these authorities. Wesley refused to obey human laws whether from the state or the Church of England, whose authority derived from the state, when in his judgment they hindered or prevented his work of proclaiming the gospel of salvation (Weber 2001:233-260). This resistance to the secular and ecclesial authorities focuses on an individualistic understanding of salvation; however, when one defines salvation in a broader and deeper sense, as Villa-Vicencio does, then then it becomes incumbent on Christians to promote justice in societies in the face of state opposition and restrictions – it requires disobedience and resistance.

There is one instance where Wesley seems to apply this beyond a narrow individualistic religious context and this is in his remarkable booklet *Thoughts upon Slavery* (Wesley 2007, 59-79). It is particularly noteworthy as the first work by an important Church leader not only to critique the cruelty of the slave trade and the abuse of enslaved people but to reject the whole institution of slavery. The slave trade was at the time a major contributor to the British economy; it was a source of wealth for members of the political and business establishment, and notably the major economic engine for the city of Bristol which was at the time an important centre for Methodism. While there is evidence that Wesley opposed slavery for most of his life it is only towards the end that he publicly addressed it and encouraged Methodist to participate in the campaign to abolish the slave trade. One of the interesting features of *Thoughts upon Slavery* is the way that Wesley indicated his approval of enslaved people's resistance to slavery, despite biblical commands that enslaved people submit to their enslavers. For Wesley, all people were born with an inherent right to liberty; slavery as the denial of that liberty was to be opposed, and various forms of resistance employed by enslaved people was their assertion of that liberty. Laws which legitimate slavery are invalid because they are contrary to the natural law of justice and mercy. Wesley however does not develop this affirmation of legitimate resistance into a systematic interpretation of the relationship of Christians and the church to a state that legalises slavery.

While Villa-Vicencio does not engage *Thoughts upon Slavery* in any of his writings; he consistently affirms the legitimacy and indeed the imperative of oppressed people to resist oppression and struggle for their own liberation as a natural God given right. When this is related to his understanding of salvation and the renewal of the church it becomes the duty of the church to resist the state, to question its legitimacy, to pray for end of unjust rule, and to work for the establishment of a government characterised by justice for all (Villa-Vicencio 1986b; 1990) Here Villa-Vicencio clearly goes beyond anything Wesley wrote or was probably capable of writing. However, it can be understood as being in continuity with and developing aspects of Wesley insistence on primary obedience to God when the human authorities require that which is contrary to the salvific will of God (though here that will is interpreted in a wholistic and

integral manner) and to his commitment to the liberty of enslaved people expressed in *Thoughts upon Slavery*.

## The significance of Charles Villa-Vicencio's theology for contemporary Methodism

Charles Villa-Vicencio's theology was formed in the crucible of the struggle for liberation against the increasingly oppressive Apartheid state. One cannot draw simple lines from that context to many of our contexts today. However, I propose that key elements of his theology have continuing significance for Methodist theology and praxis in diverse contexts today.

### The universal and the particular in Villa-Vicencio's theology

While there is much that I would affirm in Villa-Vicencio's theology, I would propose that from a Wesleyan perspective the interpretation of the relationship between the universal work and the particular work of God is problematic. Villa-Vicencio rightly develops a more comprehensive account of salvation reflecting biblical motifs from the prophets and Jesus' teaching on the reign of God. The question is whether the biblical witness to God's activity in the history of Israel and the person and work of Jesus the Christ are to be understood as exemplars of what God is doing universally, or do they have a particular defining role in God's relationship with humanity. Villa-Vicencio rightly points to the potential significance of Wesley's interpretation of prevenient grace as a way to affirm God's work throughout human society to establish justice and not merely as a stage in the order of personal salvation. However, in Wesley's theology prevenient grace is preparation for and points to the coming reign of God rather than an expression of that reign (Field 2015a). Villa-Vicencio's approach in contrast tends to interpret the work of prevenient grace in society at large as a manifestation of God's eschatological reign. Yet, Villa-Vicencio's liberative approach challenges Methodist theologians to develop a more adequate interpretation of the universal and particular work of God, or of prevenient grace and the inbreaking eschatological reign of God. Such developments will need to go critically and constructively beyond Wesley. One possibility would be to recover the aspects of Irenaeus' theology of recapitulation as a more comprehensive way of understanding salvation which resonates with

the Wesleyan understanding of salvation as transformation into the image of God even though Wesley, surprisingly, did not interact in any significant way with Irenaeus.

## A broader and deeper view of salvation

Villa-Vicencio's theology is an important corrective to the individualism that is present within both Wesley's theology and that of later Methodism. It challenges Methodists to develop an understanding of salvation and hence sanctification that moves beyond the personal and the ecclesial to encompass the socio-political and, in our contemporary context, the ecological in a way that does not compromise the importance of the particular work of God in Christ by the Spirit. While the stress on the importance of personal salvation (Wesley) must maintained it must move beyond Wesley's tendency to see socio-political change as the "natural" outworking of sanctification. Villa-Vicencio's argument that there is a need to take seriously the communal and cosmic images of salvation found in in the biblical traditions suggests an alternative way of understanding this relationship. Thus, in contrast to Wesley, the New Testament portraits of God's redemptive reign integrate the personal, the communal, and the missional. Personal salvation is thus participation in God's redeeming transforming reign in the world through being united to Christ in his body and thus accepted by God and transformed by the Spirit. God encounters human persons as the personal, vibrant, variegated transformative Love who draws them into a dynamic relationship with Godself that heals, liberates, transforms, and empowers them; integrates them into a new community with others; expresses itself in a lifestyle characterised by the pursuit of justice, of compassionate acts of mercy, of solidary with the poor and oppressed, working for peace and reconciliation, and caring for creation. When this is combined with the recognition of the structural and institutional character of evil and injustice, then sanctification must be interpreted as encompassing the socio-political realm. The pursuit of justice, including ecological justice, is thus perceived to be an integral and essential manifestation of sanctification and at the same time as a means to personal transformation or sanctification (Field 2015b).

### The challenge to identify God's work in the world

If we affirm that God is involved in the world to bring about justice, compassion, truth, and peace, Villa-Vicencio challenges us to identify what God is doing in particular contexts in order to participate in what God is doing. This is of course a complex and to a certain extent a risky endeavour. In the context of apartheid, it was clear for many (but not all) Christians that God was calling the church to oppose apartheid and to work for justice. The question which divided people like Villa-Vicencio from others was their willingness to affirm that God was at work through the liberation movements even if they were not perfect instruments. In our diverse contexts we are challenged to discern, in the light of the biblical witness, where God is actively present in the world bringing justice, compassion, and peace in order that we might respond to God's grace by participating in what God is doing.

### The challenge to take sides

The church always tends to work to be as comprehensive as possible including people with diverse political and social perspectives. In many contexts this is legitimate, yet it is open to the danger that its proclamation of the gospel becomes bland and ceases to be a call to costly discipleship expressed in the pursuit of justice, compassion, and peace. In the context of Apartheid, such a policy of neutrality inevitably meant the failure to clearly oppose injustice and thus supported the maintenance of Apartheid. Villa-Vicencio's theology was a call to take sides. Neutrality and half measures were not an option – the church needed to clearly declare and act out its opposition to Apartheid and its support of the liberation struggle even if that meant losing members and enduring the opposition of the state. While our contexts differ, the challenge to take sides remains as we consider particular ethical issues in our contexts. It is a call to examine the particulars of our contexts to discern when and where it is necessary to take sides on an issue that could be divisive within the church, but which is necessitated by the claims of the gospel.

### The challenge to become the church of the marginalised

Villa-Vicencio challenged the church not only to serve the marginalised and stand in solidarity with them, but to be of them and to advocate their

cause in contexts of injustice, exploitation, and oppression. What this entailed in Apartheid South Africa was for Villa-Vicencio clear; this was not only because of the undeniable realities of Apartheid oppression but also because the majority of the membership of the churches were oppressed people and the majority of the oppressed people were members of a church. This is not the case in all contexts today. Many marginalised people are alienated from the church or may be members of other faiths. Responding to Villa-Vicencio's challenge begins with a careful listening to the voice of the marginalised within the church and society. The institutional church needs to develop the habit of listening and seeing, and to refrain from the temptation to simply provide its own solutions. In listening it needs to ask itself whether it can discern the cry of the Spirit of God in the voice of the marginalised. In seeing, whether it can discern the active presence of the Spirit. On this basis it must ask what it means to participate in what the Spirit is doing in and amongst the marginalised.

### The challenge to work for the renewal of the church

Discussions of the renewal of the church often focus on spirituality what Wesley referred to as "works of piety". Villa-Vicencio offers a complimentary vision focused more on what Wesley described as "works of mercy" – discerning where God is at work amongst the poor and marginalised so that the church can participate in what God is doing. Yet this does not neglect the spiritual as can be seen in Villa-Vicencio's affirmation of the importance of worship. The renewal of the church requires the integration of the spiritual in all aspects of life so that it becomes the foretaste of God's reign in the world. Such a renewal of the church will not necessarily mean the growth of the church, nor the increase in its popularity; rather it will mean that the church becomes a turbulent presence in society bearing witness to the ever-transforming presence of the divine reign.

## Conclusion

In a turbulent world, the temptation the church faces is to cry peace where there is no peace. Villa-Vicencio's theology proposes an alternative. It is precisely in a turbulent world that the church needs to be turbulent. Turbulent not for the sake of being turbulent but turbulent because it is

called to bear witness to the liberating presence of God in a world where the forces of injustice, exploitation, war, and oppression would rather have a quiet and peaceful church.

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