“Finding Redemption in the City”
by Fletcher L. Tink,

The man, given name, status and commission of great social responsibility, spends two years in the small community and “blows it.” He has women problems, is seen as judgmental, legalistic and heretical and is run out of town. And yet the town honors him with a statue in a main square, exhibits his artifacts, has constructed an edifice celebrating his name, and advertises his story generously to tourists. What gives?

In 1967, Harvey Cox wrote a landmark publication called, The Secular City, in which he celebrated the secularization of the city, seeing in that process something redemptive about urban environments. Of course, he was roundly criticized by many who saw the same process as a threat to evangelical Christianity, a lead into the “God is Dead” movement.

However, it is his description of two characteristics of the city that linger in my memory. Too often we romanticize the rural with our anti-urban bias, conjuring up memories of down-home hospitality, conservative traditional values and a sense of belonging.

Yet Cox suggests that we mythologize much of that. Often, rural and small town areas are communities that lock people into life-styles and regimentation that diminish their potential and crush their spirit. Rumors, stereotypes, and censure control lives, often subtly but cruelly in these contexts.

In contrast, Cox defines the secularization process at work in the City through two processes, anonymity and mobility, and distills from these concepts some positive aspects.

A person from the non-urban environment, saddled with bad reputation and limited hopes can come to the city where he or she can get a new start. Few urban people are concerned about origins or the past. They want to know how a person is now, what they can contribute to the whole. And that person can be recognized and rewarded for contemporary contributions, can scale upwardly the social ladder, and achieve glory and fulfillment unknown in the former life. In new starts and blossoming possibilities in the city, Cox sees a message consonant with the promise of salvation contained in Scripture.

I am not sure I fully agree. Somewhere in the mix, there needs to be a reaching out for God, and receiving by faith, forgiveness and salvation and then, perhaps the rest kicks in. The city cannot save, in any true theological sense. But it can provide a context where salvation can become authenticated in a myriad of forms. Nevertheless, there is something enticing about his argument.

Now let’s take the example of the sorry chap in the opening paragraph. The years are 1736-8. The misfit is John Wesley. The town is Savannah, Georgia, then a new colony laid out and designed by the British governor, Oglethorp. Wesley, schooled in the classics and trained to serve as a parish priest, is convinced that his stint there would access him to the Native Americans that surrounded the town. However, his “managers” had alternate intentions for him.

He is consigned to ministering to unmotivated, undisciplined colonists. As a bachelor committed to singular devotion to God, he is prey to at least two women of the colony, one married, one single. The married woman physically manhandles him into an embarrassing situation that he apologetically exits. In the other case, teenager Sophia Hopkey, tall and slender with hazel eyes and light brown hair and 15 years his junior, seeks Wesley out as mentor and counselor, a relationship that steers inevitably towards romance. However, Wesley is so single-minded, he doesn’t pick up the cues. She rebounds to a lesser suitor and Wesley is profoundly annoyed, refusing to announce the engagement, or, after marriage, celebrate their holy communion. A suit follows, and a generous array of charges are drummed up, accusing him of a variety of irregularities. Wesley makes a quick getaway out of town and flees back to England, with his figurative coat tails between his legs. He never returns to America!

Yet, over the years, his legacy in Savannah recaptures the “rest of the story.” It recognizes that this Oxford don goes through a spiritual remake at Aldersgate where he discovers a personal Christianity that fires his spirit and rejuvenates his purpose. After this period of soul searching and discovery, he launches into ministry throughout the European continent. With his brother Charles who similarly was a washout in nearby Frederica where it is said not a single person regretted his farewell, launches a movement that perhaps saved Britain from Civil War and preserved Christianity from dry formalism. It was out of their initiatives that the Methodist Church and many other Wesleyan-Arminian-Holiness-Pentecostal denominations were born including our own Church of the Nazarene.

Savannah is forgiving and gives its loser a second chance. In Reynolds Square, a statue of Wesley rises up, honoring its
ignominious son. A few blocks away, Christ Church, the Episcopal chapel that Wesley so shortly pastored, celebrates their most famous priest. In another direction, Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church bears his name. Trinity United Methodist Church, the oldest Methodist Church in the city, happily claims him as its own. City brochures announce tours that expose less his failures than his substantial contributions to Christianity and the world at large.

One local newspaper staff writer, Tim Diass, offers gentle perspective on the whole miserable incident. “Though he left in disgrace, his days in Georgia were not wasted. He credited his Savannah stay as a time of maturation and soul-searching.” He comments further that, at the end of the story, Wesley’s “... contribution to Protestantism, Christianity, and Western Civilization was enormous. He penned over 400 books including biographies, devotionals, English grammars, French, Latin, Hebrew and Greek grammars, treatises on logic, medicine, literary criticism, theology, history and philosophy. In England, he rallied in support of labor laws to protect workers and was an advocate for the poor and suffering. It has been estimated that he traveled over 250,000 miles on horseback preaching the gospel. And from his life’s work, Methodism, one of the largest Protestant churches in the world has flourished.”

And even the sad romance is not forgotten. According to Diass, “Wesley never forgot Sophia. Even in his later years, he often wrote about her and his time in Savannah in his private journal.”

Perhaps in the glitz or grit of the city, there is something good to be said for it----grace, forgiving grace that allows one to start again and achieve the potential than other environments cannot offer. At least that is what the Wesley saga sweetly reminds us of in a beautiful southern city called Savannah.