

**“Spreading Scriptural Holiness:  
Theology and Practices of Early Methodism for the Contemporary Church”**

Submitted by  
Lacey Warner  
Duke Divinity School

**Introduction**

Scholars have asserted that the early Methodist movement—above all else—was evangelistic. While other denominational traditions often trace their roots to disagreements regarding confessional or theological points, the Wesleyan tradition emerged from an evangelistic and missional imperative.<sup>1</sup> However, the contemporary language of mission and evangelism with which we are familiar was not in use during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the “Large” *Minutes*, John Wesley summarized his understanding of Methodism’s purpose: “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists? A. To reform the nation and, in particular, the Church; to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”

This essay engages aspects of the expansion of the early Methodist movement in Great Britain and their subsequent implications for faithful and effective participation in God’s present mission in the world as messengers of the gospel through disciplined practices of Christian formation.<sup>2</sup> The early Methodist movement offers resources to

---

<sup>1</sup> James Logan, “The Evangelical Imperative: A Wesleyan Perspective,” in *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage*, ed. James Logan, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 16. See also Albert Outler, *Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Albert C. Outler, “A New Future for Wesley Studies: An Agenda for ‘Phase III,’” in Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden, eds., *Essays of Albert C. Outler: The Wesleyan Theological Heritage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 125-42. In this essay, Outler outlined previous and possible phases of Wesley Studies as well as the issues confronting the work: Phase I: The Methodist Cocoon (in which Methodists were basically content to leave their patriarch on his pedestal), Phase II: Selective

local congregations among mainline Protestant denominations in the contemporary North American context preoccupied with a shallow connotation of evangelism as merely advertising or hospitality towards the goal of membership recruitment rather than a comprehensive set of practices for Christian initiation and formation.<sup>3</sup>

These congregations and denominations often confront obstacles to faithful and effective ministry practices such as: (1) preoccupation with rapid numerical growth to reverse the trend of membership decline, (2) lack of theological reflection, (3) disinterest in sustained Christian practices or spiritual disciplines, and (4) reluctance to engage the

---

Interpretations (which demonstrated a lessening emphasis upon the Wesley-Methodist symbiosis); and Phase III: Historical Context and Ecumenical Relevance (in the midst of historiographical and hermeneutical issues. Outler goes on to argue that serious Wesley studies must also seek relevance for contemporary Christians as well as Methodists). This essay, building on others in a similar vein, pursues what may be categorized as Phase III Wesley Studies related particularly to the theme of evangelism. Randy Maddox proposes the theme of forming Christian leaders, lay, clergy, and scholarly, as a Wesleyan agenda for the future in his essay, Randy L. Maddox, "Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Some Wesleyan Agendas," Richard Sykes, ed., *Methodism Across the Pond: Perspectives Past and Present on the Church in Britain and America* (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 2005), 45-60.

<sup>3</sup> William J. Abraham's text, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), in many ways initiates the academic study of evangelism by providing a theological and philosophical framework to pertinent and significant questions. Scott J. Jones, in *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), continues this trajectory building on Abraham's assertions. Walter Klaiber, in *Call and Response: Biblical Foundations of a Theology of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), also contributes to the shape of biblical foundations for evangelism. Mortimer Arias in his texts *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelism and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984; reprint, Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999) and with Alan Johnson, *The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1992), as well as David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), Darrell L. Guder, eds., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), and Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), among others, explore theological implications for the church's practices of evangelism and mission.

other particularly across socio-economic boundaries including wealth-sharing. Four aspects of the early Methodist movement offer resources in light of these obstacles are:

- (1) *'Growth'*: While much of contemporary 'evangelism' is quantified by the rapid increase of local church attendance, the early Methodist movement, despite staggering numbers of listeners to open-air preaching, acknowledged a relatively slow growth through an intense process of Christian formation in small group gatherings resulting in changed lives.
- (2) *Doctrine*: The doctrinal foundation of the Methodist movement did not prioritize technical distinctions from other traditions. Instead, a simple authentic scriptural Christianity framed the movement. Exposure to doctrine, particularly through Charles' hymns evangelized and nurtured individuals in the Christian faith.
- (3) *Organization and practices*: The intentionality of the early Methodist movement's organization and practices, particularly classes, bands, and lay preachers, emerged from doctrinal frames for the purpose of facilitating intentional and meaningful growth among participants.
- (4) *Wealth-sharing*: Theological consideration of economics and its implications for personal and communal faith was an important if not essential discipline required of early Methodists that contributed significantly to changed lives—among both givers and receivers.

By reflecting upon these aspects of the early Methodist movement in light of contemporary obstacles to Christian formation, this project aims to contribute to discernment of the church's mission and vocation "to serve the present age."

### **John, Charles, and Evangelism**

John Wesley, seen as the architect of the early Methodist movement, navigated sometimes treacherous landscapes of doctrinal and ideological polemics, while remaining focused on the evangelistic task. Though John lived and died within the Church of England, his decisions, for example regarding his ordination of Coke, Whatcoat and Vasey, while evangelistically motivated, contributed to the differentiation of Methodism

from the Church of England.<sup>4</sup> John's strong doctrinal commitments to an authentic Christianity and innovative leadership within the early Methodist movement, including his facilitating lay preachers/exhorters (including women), building gathering spaces, and ultimately ordaining a select few, encouraged renewal within the Church of England, and at the same time created a distinctive Methodist movement.<sup>5</sup>

Charles differed strongly from his elder brother John on the related issues of ordination within the early Methodist movement and its separation from the Church of England. In light of the brothers' distinctiveness on such issues, and the connection of John's innovative leadership to the early Wesleyan tradition's evangelistic imperative, does this imply Charles did not share John's evangelistic imperative? No. Charles' commitments to the Church of England and its renewal, specifically the deepening of faith and discipleship among its adherents through preaching and hymnody, were distinctly—if not dramatically—evangelistic.<sup>6</sup> Some would argue that maintaining ecclesial unity is *the* evangelistic and missional imperative—since disunity arguably undermines the witness of the Christian gospel.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> From 1745, John Wesley was convinced of Lord Peter King's argument in *Enquiry* that bishops and presbyters were from the same order, providing a rationale for John's later ordinations. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 192, 286.

<sup>5</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 321.

<sup>6</sup> Charles has even been called "the first Methodist." See Frederick C. Gill, *Charles Wesley: The First Methodist* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964). However, not without dissent. See also Frank Baker's review in *Duke Divinity School Review* 30 (Autumn 1965), 212-13.

<sup>7</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 205-10. In his discussion of the missionary paradigm of the Eastern Church, Bosch explains, "If mission is a manifestation of the life and worship of the [Orthodox] church, then *mission and unity* go together." See Bosch, 208.

Charles Wesley's evangelistic leadership within the early Methodist movement included traditionally identified practices such as preaching and visitation as well as the strong influence of his hymns upon the Christian formation of early Methodists.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these, his commitment to the Church of England, through his opposition to separation, demonstrated evangelistic commitment. Accounts of early Methodism featuring the ministries of both John and Charles, though their styles remained distinct, demonstrate a shared purpose for renewal. This shared purpose benefited from the complement of each brother's gifts and perspective for the large portion of their lives and ministry in a common evangelistic cause—to spread scriptural holiness.<sup>9</sup>

### **Counting Conversions: Growth of the Movement**

It may be worth stating, that for me, there is nothing wrong with numerical growth.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately the message of salvation is good news resulting in the expansion of the reign of God.<sup>11</sup> However, focusing so narrowly upon quantitative growth,

---

<sup>8</sup> John R. Tyson, "Charles Wesley, Evangelist: The Unpublished New Castle Journal," *Methodist History* 25:1 (October 1986), 41-60. The journal describes Charles' persistent practices of traditional evangelism such as itinerant preaching, prison visitation, and care for the outcast.

<sup>9</sup> For example: Leslie F. Church, "Charles Wesley—the Man," *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review* (October 1957), 247-48; Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 49, 232; and Frank Baker, "Charles Wesley's Letter," in S.T. Kimbrough, ed., *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992), 74.

<sup>10</sup> David Bosch explains that evangelism is "not a call to put something into effect, as if God's reign would be inaugurated by our response or thwarted by the absence of such a response...In light of this, evangelism cannot be defined in terms of its results or effectiveness, as though evangelism has only occurred where there are 'converts.' Even so, evangelism does aim at a response." See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 412-13.

<sup>11</sup> As Walter Klaiber notes, the good news is not necessarily good in its initial hearing. Therefore, he suggests language from biblical foundations of message of

specifically congregational membership, reveals a myopia overlooking the true telos of the gospel of Jesus Christ—the reign of God.<sup>12</sup> A further bereavement occurs when many local churches in their desire to add members look only to similar demographics and/or similar or higher social status, neglecting Jesus’ ministry with the marginalized, including children, the infirm and impoverished.<sup>13</sup>

This is all to say that ‘growth’ in early Methodism did take account of numbers, but ultimately remained focused upon growth in grace through relationship with God and neighbor in the unfolding reign of God. This section surveys the expansion of early Methodism related to participation in field preaching and the networks of societies that composed circuits. This section relies upon statistics gleaned and interpreted by Richard Heitzenrater in his, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*. Subsequent sections will unpack the interconnectedness of a steady, and sometimes slow, growth in the early Methodist movement emerging from doctrinal foundations and facilitated by organization and practices, including wealth-sharing.

---

salvation to describe the concept of evangelism. See Walter Klaiber, *Call and Response*, 22-26.

<sup>12</sup> According to Lesslie Newbigin, although the earliest accounts of the Christian church in Acts highlight numerical growth, “the rest of the New Testament furnishes little evidence of interest in numerical growth.” Newbigin argued, “The emphasis falls upon the faithfulness of the disciples rather than upon their numbers.” He continued, “In no sense does the triumph of God’s reign seem to depend upon the growth of the church.” See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, revised edition 1995), 125. Newbigin offers these remarks in a constructive response to Donald McGavran and The Institute of Church Growth of the School of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, particularly content of a presentation by McGavran made to the International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> Jones, *Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor*, 41-2. This focus upon similar demographics can echo church growth techniques based on a homogenous unit principle.

The Evangelical Revival in England, of which the Methodist renewal movement was a part, included such themes as strong preaching, evangelical conversions, and spiritual demonstrations.<sup>14</sup> The Methodist renewal movement began modestly early in 1739 in Bristol with the inauguration of field preaching by George Whitefield among the coal miners of Kingswood, soon followed by class meetings.<sup>15</sup> Upon Whitefield's invitation, John arrived in Bristol in late March 1739 to take Whitefield's place among the societies.<sup>16</sup> When John learned of Whitefield's preaching in the open air he wrote that he could "scarce reconcile [himself] at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields."<sup>17</sup> While open air preaching, often called field preaching, though not necessarily limited to fields, was not illegal, it was highly irregular, especially among respectable Anglican clergy. John claimed he had been "so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that [he] should have thought the saving souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."<sup>18</sup>

However, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, John's text for April 1<sup>st</sup>, provided a persuasive precedent alongside his witnessing Whitefield preach to approximately 30,000 persons.<sup>19</sup> The following afternoon John "submitted 'to be more vile'" and preached in the open air by his estimate to 3-4,000.<sup>20</sup> During his first month in Bristol, John estimated a total attendance of 47,500 persons at his field preaching, an average of 3,000 per

---

<sup>14</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 97. As Heitzenrater explains, Bristol was a growing industrial center and port of nearly 50,000 (about one-tenth the population of London). Heitzenrater, 98-99.

<sup>16</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 98.

<sup>17</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 99. J&D, 18:612.

<sup>18</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 100.

event.<sup>21</sup> Charles was skeptical of the practice of field preaching, particularly the excessive numbers reported by Whitfield and his brother.<sup>22</sup> His skepticism waned following his albeit reluctant—claiming he “broke down the bridge” and became desperate”—preaching at Moorfields on June 24, 1739 to a crowd he calculated at 10,000. The large crowd convinced him it was a work of God’s will.<sup>23</sup> John, Charles, and Whitefield continued to preach in the open air attracting tremendous crowds, Whitefield usually attracting the largest. In addition to the ‘fields’, these itinerant preachers and their cohorts addressed crowds in a variety of contexts such as prisons, gallows, grave yards, market squares, mines, as well as an occasional advantageous acoustical spot under a tree.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the staggering numbers reported at such gatherings, in 1744, John cautioned against excessive field preaching as his leadership turned to consolidating the movement and creating a foundation of doctrine and discipline.<sup>25</sup> As Heitzenrater observes, the aim of John’s leadership of the early Methodist renewal movement to

---

<sup>21</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 100. Presumably, these field preachers felt some need to justify their irregular practice, leading to the emphasis upon such staggering numbers.

<sup>22</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 100. CWJ 1:155. For another account of Charles’ initial move into field preaching see W.L. Doughty, “Charles Wesley, Preacher,” *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review* (October 1957), 264. For references to Charles and preaching see also John R. Tyson, *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 137, 155, 159, 240, 246. For twenty years Charles was a traveling evangelist, while continuing as a priest and pastor. See Church, “Charles Wesley—The Man,” 251.

<sup>24</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 99-100.

<sup>25</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 99-100. According to Heitzenrater John suggested, “To avoid giving needless offense, we never preach *without* doors when we can with any conveniency preach *within*.” The expansion was to be gradual, to “go a little and a little” from the society meetings “so a little leaven would spread with more effect and less noise, and help would always be at hand.” (Minutes, 23).

“spread scriptural holiness” was not to create a “wildfire”, but rather to manage an intentional and steady pace of growth.<sup>26</sup>

Although Whitefield and the Wesleys’ preaching, particularly in the open air, is well documented for its evangelistic impact upon British as well as North American Christianity, their preaching did not stand alone as an effective method of evangelism. Significant to understanding preaching as one aspect of the early Methodist renewal movement is the practice of preaching alongside the creation of societies and/or preaching in areas where religious societies such as bands and class meetings existed. In 1745 the Methodist Conference under John’s leadership decided to experiment with preaching wherever opportunities arose, first in Wales and Cornwall, and then later in the north, without forming societies, or regardless of the presence of societies, to nurture those responding.<sup>27</sup> The results of the experiment were unequivocal. Christian formation provided by the Methodist small groups organized by John Wesley allowed a significant number of those moved by the revival’s preaching to be nurtured and maintained in the faith.<sup>28</sup> When these groups were not accessible, those moved by the preaching were often lost. The experiment ceased in 1748, and the Conference turned its focus to the formation of societies.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 54-55.

<sup>28</sup> Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 115. Runyon argues that despite George Whitefield’s larger crowds and greater public attention, Wesley and his religious societies most likely preserved more fruits from the eighteenth century revival preaching as a result of their Christian nurture and discipleship.

<sup>29</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 165. John noted in the Minutes: “Almost all the seed has fallen by the wayside; there is scarce any fruit of it remaining.” According to Heitzenrater quoting John, “The preacher had little opportunity for instructions, the awakened souls could not ‘watch over one another in

By 1750 the Methodist revival was a recognizable feature in Britain.<sup>30</sup> Centered mostly in London with societies there consisting of approximately 2,000, Methodism was sizable, but with 10,000 members nationwide was only one-half of one percent of the total population of 10 million.<sup>31</sup> Nearly three dozen preachers in England, Wales, and Ireland were preaching on nine circuits, which served almost one hundred societies.<sup>32</sup> Into the 1760s, Methodism was quite different from twenty years earlier with over thirty circuits in England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. Nearly one hundred traveling preachers encouraged 20,000 society members—still a relatively small number, the membership growing nationally by less than 1,000 per year.<sup>33</sup>

By the middle of the 1770s, Methodism was growing steadily in America, although in both North America and England the political views of John and Frances Asbury could result in the occasional loss of membership, for example, their anti-slavery stance.<sup>34</sup> In England, societies were steadily growing by approximately 1600 members per year. However, about a quarter of the circuits showed a yearly decrease (and were marked with an asterisk in the Minutes), while some remained stable, and others grew. In

---

love,’ and the believers could not ‘build up one another and bear one another’s burdens.’” A more detailed discussion of spiritual formation and small groups occurs in the subsequent section “‘To Watch Over One Another in Love’: Organization and Practices.”

<sup>30</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 181.

<sup>31</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 181, see also map, 180.

<sup>32</sup> Still facing occasional persecution, Methodism was considered fanatical by many and not well understood by most. See Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 181.

<sup>33</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 216-17.

<sup>34</sup> See Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality 1780-1845* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1965, rev.1978).

1775, Leeds was the second circuit to surpass 2,000 members with London, which was still at 2500 after twenty years.<sup>35</sup>

In 1781, with continued steady growth there were 178 preachers, one for every 250 members, a constant ratio since 1767. The number of circuits had nearly doubled to sixty-three (in England), but only about a dozen had over 1,000 members. Interestingly, the asterisks in the Minutes formerly marking declining circuits, marked growing ones. Perhaps because more than twice as many circuits as in the worst previous year had lost members.<sup>36</sup> While growth was steady overall, this did not preclude the possibility for local decline or other setbacks.

In his letter to Vincent Perronet, in December 1748, later published as a pamphlet entitled, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” John described the emergence of the early Methodist renewal movement with little if any reference to quantitative growth. Instead, the document tracked a rich tapestry of themes embodied by and characteristic of the movement, namely, theology, organization, and mission growing from a shared commitment to ‘spreading scriptural holiness.’<sup>37</sup>

### **“Following Only Common Sense and Scripture”: Doctrinal Foundations**

According to scholars, in the last two centuries a steady decline in theological aptitude has occurred among those interested in evangelistic ministries. This has resulted in a lack of theological reflection related to Christian practices, especially evangelism.

---

<sup>35</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 264-65. See chart.

<sup>36</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 276.

<sup>37</sup> See Heitzenrater for more a more detailed description of John’s letter to Perronet and the emerging depth and complexities of the movement. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 179-80.

John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards are both considered great scholars and practitioners of evangelistic theology and ministry of their generations. However, the beginnings of a major shift may be detected during the nineteenth century toward a growing apathy for the intellectual pursuits and lack of interest in theological discourse by those related to evangelistic thought and practice.<sup>38</sup>

In the contemporary context this shift manifests itself in the prioritizing of social scientific methods, including marketing techniques, in “doing” evangelism.<sup>39</sup> While there is nothing inherently wrong with psychological/therapeutic or business/marketing tools, these must not take precedent over the salvation narrative of scripture, Christian theological tradition, and spiritual formation experiences. These tools can be helpful, but only if viewed through the lens of faith and practice—of *being* Christian in communities of accountability.

Despite their social status, privileged education and theological formation, the Wesleys’ did not emphasize a sophisticated doctrinal distinctiveness for the Methodist movement. Instead, John described a shared desire with Charles in his “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” to preach and “to convince those who would hear what true Christianity was and to persuade them to embrace it.”<sup>40</sup> John seemed to emphasize the unexpected emergence and expansion of the early Methodist renewal movement. Within this seemingly unexpected emergence, he named the following as important resources for the early Methodists: “following only *common sense* and *Scripture*; though

---

<sup>38</sup> Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> See Philip D. Kenneson, “Selling [Out] the Church in the Marketplace of Desire,” *Modern Theology*, 9 (October 1993), 319-48.

<sup>40</sup> “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” I.1, *Works*, 9: 254.

they generally found, in looking back, something in *Christian antiquity*...”<sup>41</sup> The following four points were “chiefly insisted upon”:

First, that orthodoxy, or right opinions, is at best but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all; that neither does religion consist in negatives, in bare harmlessness of any kind; nor merely in externals, in doing good, or using the means of grace, in works of piety (so called) or of charity: that it is nothing short of or different from the ‘mind that was in Christ’; the image of God stamped upon the heart; inward righteousness, attended with the peace of God and ‘joy in the Holy Ghost.’

Secondly, that the only way under heaven to this religion is to ‘repent and believe the gospel’; or (as the Apostle words it) ‘repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.’

Thirdly, that by this faith, ‘he that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, is justified freely by His grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ.’

And, lastly, that ‘being justified by faith,’ we taste of the heaven to which we are going, we are holy and happy, we tread down sin and fear, and ‘sit in heavenly places with Christ Jesus.’<sup>42</sup>

In this way, John, with Charles, emphasized Christian doctrinal foundations of relative simplicity, particularly justification while hinting at sanctification, from a perspective that resonated with persons’ spiritual experiences.

---

<sup>41</sup> “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” Intro: 2, *Works*, 9: 254. Italics mine.

<sup>42</sup> “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” I.2. *Works*, 9: 254-55. See also Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960), 401. According to Finney, “The church is mighty orthodox in notions, but very heretical in practice, but the time must come when the church will be just as vigilant in guarding orthodoxy in practice as orthodoxy in doctrine, and just as prompt to turn out heretics in practice as heretics that corrupt the doctrines of the gospel.” Abraham argues that Finney marks a shift away from serious theological reflection among practitioners. He summarizes, “In other words, we not only need to attend to the experiential, communal, and moral dimensions of initiation; we also need to deal with its intellectual, operational, and disciplinary aspects.” Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 9, 142. For a provocative discussion of epistemology of conversion, particularly Wesley’s bi-focal attempt looking to God’s being as an indication of God’s love experienced in the present, or as salvation now, see William J. Abraham, “The Epistemology of Conversion: Is There Something New?” in Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson, eds., *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 175-91.

Following their rather dramatic spiritual experiences in 1738, John and Charles tended to emphasize justification, with Charles focusing five of his six first sermons on the theme.<sup>43</sup> The Wesleys' asserted the doctrine was under-represented during their time and context. In his 1739 sermon, "On Justification," Charles argued that the doctrine of justification by faith alone was clearly represented in the Articles and Homilies suggesting that this essential Christian foundation had been abandoned.<sup>44</sup> Charles argued that evangelism was not a novelty of the revival era, but rather intrinsic to Christian doctrine and grounded in scripture and tradition.

In his "The Character of a Methodist," John answered the questions, "who is a Methodist?" and "what is the mark?" with this response: "A Methodist is one who has the love of God shed abroad in [one's] heart."<sup>45</sup> For the Wesleys' the marks of Methodism were not religious opinions or distinctive doctrinal commitments setting them apart from other Christians. Grounding his comments in "all sufficient" scripture, John turned not to technical distinctions, but to a broad doctrinal foundation of salvation by faith and holiness of heart and life.<sup>46</sup> A shared focus upon justification and sanctification provides a helpful resource for contemporary congregations with little if any doctrinal frame beyond a 'decision' based evangelism for the purpose of membership recruitment in local congregations.

---

<sup>43</sup> Robin Leaver, "Charles Wesley and Anglicanism," in ST Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992), 158, Thomas R. Albin, "Charles Wesley's Other Prose Writings," in ST Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992), 89. For example, No. 3 Luke 16:10 "Faithfulness in Little Things," (1736) though, as Albin, points out, the authorship is questionable.

<sup>44</sup> Albin, "Charles Wesley's Other Prose Writings," 90.

<sup>45</sup> "The Character of a Methodist," 2.5, *Works*, 9: 35.

<sup>46</sup> "The Character of a Methodist," 2.4, *Works*, 9: 35.

In his essay, “Formation for Christian Leadership: Wesleyan Reflections,” Randy Maddox ably connects John’s reflections near the end of his ministry in his sermon “Causes of the Inefficacies of Christianity,” to the contemporary context. John opens the sermon with the assertion that Christian communities across the world had done so little good because they produced so few *real* Christians.<sup>47</sup> Wesley outlined three obstacles faced by the church which contributed to this plight. Christians in such communities often lacked: (1) a sufficient understanding of doctrine, (2) adequate discipline, and/or (3) self-denial. According to Wesley in this later sermon, an inadequate view of salvation too confined to forgiveness of sins or too narrowly focused upon justification led Christian communities to nurture few real Christians.<sup>48</sup>

The Wesleys’ theological reflection was strongly influenced by their own and others’ spiritual and life experience. The Wesleys’ approach to ministry included continual study and theological discourse in conversation with fellow scholars, ministers, and believers around issues of faith and doctrine. While John may receive more attention in many cases, the theological integration and foundation of the movement is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the composition and use of Charles’ hymns. A revisiting of the role of Charles Wesley’s hymns composed for the people called Methodists can contribute to a positive shift towards theological integration in contemporary Christian practices such as evangelism.

---

<sup>47</sup> Randy Maddox, “Formation for Christian Leadership: Wesleyan Reflections,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 57: 1, 115.

<sup>48</sup> Maddox, “Formation for Christian Leadership,” 116. Maddox goes on to unpack the twofold natures of sin, grace, and salvation in his instructive essay.

The primary purpose of hymn-singing in the early Methodist renewal movement was Christian formation through catechism in scripture and doctrine.<sup>49</sup> Though Charles did not write all of the poetry to accompany such hymns, he wrote much of it. As scholars have noted, Charles' poetry sung widely as hymns more than anything else formed the early Methodists. Brian Beck asserts that despite the scriptural doctrinal content and influence of the hymns composed largely by Charles, the hymn books of the early Methodist movement did not receive doctrinal status.<sup>50</sup> In 1784 the Deed of Declaration granted doctrinal status to John's *Notes on the New Testament* and the first four volumes of *Sermons*, however, no such status was given to a hymn book. Beck argues,

“We deceive ourselves, I believe, if we imagine that John Wesley's extensive theological writings were the decisive influence in the formation of the Methodist preachers or their hearers. Their importance in the controversies of the time and their influence on the preachers who read them cannot be denied, but the words that lingered in the minds of the society members...were not snatches from [sermons or notes]...but [hymns].”<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Heitzenrateer, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 231. Hymn singing also gives believers an opportunity to testify spiritual experiences.

<sup>50</sup> Brian Beck, “Rattenbury Revisited: The Theology of Charles Wesley's Hymns,” *Epworth Review* 26:2 (April 1999), 71.

<sup>51</sup> Beck, “Rattenbury Revisited: The Theology of Charles Wesley's Hymns,” 72. Exposure to Charles' hymns are demonstrated by impressive printing statistics, for example, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (ten editions in just under fifty years) or the *Large Hymn Book* of 1780 (seven editions in twelve years). Charles, with John, also published widely in addition to hymns. For example, Charles Wesley's “Awake Thou that Sleepest,” written in 1742 and preached before the University at Oxford April 4, 1742 was the most published and purchased tract in early Methodism. See Tyson, *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 13, 212-220. According to Doughty, “Dust may lie thickly on the tomes of eighteenth-century sermons, but there are few churches in Methodism—and even beyond her borders—in which Charles Wesley does not preach on almost every Sunday of the year in those glorious hymns which are so rich a part of our Christian heritage, and dead and dying souls are quickened into newness of life.” Doughty, “Charles Wesley, Preacher,” 267. See also Albin, “Charles Wesley's Other Prose Writings,” 91.

In contemporary United Methodism, the *United Methodist Hymnal* and *Book of Worship* are recognized informally as doctrine by virtue of each receiving approval by the General Conference prior to publication, although the *United Methodist Hymnal* includes only fifty-two Wesleyan hymns.

In his hymns, both instruments and products of the movement, Charles drew heavily from scripture both in verbal allusions and imagery.<sup>52</sup> John's arrangement of hymns in the 1780 hymn book follows a pattern of spiritual experience that is instructive for a context lacking in exposure to and knowledge of Christian scripture.<sup>53</sup> As Ernest Rattenbury observed, everything is written within the framework of an eighteenth century Arminian evangelical theology.<sup>54</sup> In spite of their lack of doctrinal status, Rattenbury argued John treated the hymns as doctrinal documents.<sup>55</sup> The hymns consistently focus upon atonement and personal salvation as central to the gospel and Christian scripture.<sup>56</sup> Thomas Langford described the Wesleyan hymns as leading one back to basic themes

---

<sup>52</sup> Paul Ellingworth, "I' and 'We' in Charles Wesley's Hymns," *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review* (April 1963), 156. The hymns were both instruments and products of the movement. Their meaning/truth/life found in the following three main facets of early Methodism: (1) in individual experience and private devotion, (2) in the corporate life of the bands, classes and societies, and (3) in the evangelism, especially field preaching of the Wesleys and their helpers. See also Beck, "Rattenbury Revisited: The Theology of Charles Wesley's Hymns," 73.

<sup>53</sup> Beck, "Rattenbury Revisited: The Theology of Charles Wesley's Hymns," 71, 75, 77. Charles' hymns are not without some criticism, particularly from scholars in the contemporary context. Such criticisms include a lack of attention to the social impact of the gospel and prophetic implications for the ordering of public life or conduct of nations. See Beck, 78. See also Ellingworth, "I' and 'We' in Charles Wesley's Hymns," 156, 159, 160. Ellingworth argues that Charles' hymns are largely individualistic, though they reach upward and then outward. He claims they are limited to the world of nature, and the Church is portrayed as mostly invisible.

<sup>54</sup> Beck, "Rattenbury Revisited: The Theology of Charles Wesley's Hymns," 74.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas A. Langford, "Charles Wesley as Theologian," in ST Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian*, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992), 99.

<sup>56</sup> Beck, "Rattenbury Revisited: The Theology of Charles Wesley's Hymns," 74.

and emotions of the formative faith: the soteriological center, the emphasis on God's grace and human appropriation, the challenge for growth and missional responsibility.<sup>57</sup>

According to Langford,

Charles Wesley is important not because he added new thoughts or insights to theological discourse, but because he creatively provided for the Methodist revival a theological character suited to its self-understanding. He added a distinctive theological dimension; or, perhaps better, he helped provide a new dimension to theological expression for the Methodist revival; that is, he kept theology immediately and ineluctably related to the worship and service of God.<sup>58</sup>

In this distinctive theological dimension, Charles, with John, maintained a solid doctrinal foundation for the dynamic missional components of the early Methodist movement—connecting doctrine, with practices, for the purpose of spreading scriptural holiness.

#### **“To Watch Over One Another in Love”: Organization and Practices**

Not unlike John's observations in “Causes of the Inefficacies of Christianity,” contemporary congregations often demonstrate apathy for sustained Christian practices, or in John's words—discipline—preferring instead techniques promising immediate results.<sup>59</sup> However, John, with Charles, oversaw the organization of the early Methodist movement with intentional connectedness, not merely to one another for mutual support and accountability, but also to the movement's aim to form believers in holiness of heart and life. John consistently urged that authentic spiritual formation could not take place,

---

<sup>57</sup> Langford, “Charles Wesley as Theologian,” 98.

<sup>58</sup> Langford, “Charles Wesley as Theologian,” 104.

<sup>59</sup> See Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in the Christian Community* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), and Kallenberg, *Live to Tell*.

“without society, without living and conversing with [others].”<sup>60</sup> The distinctiveness of the early Methodist movement was not in its novelty or innovation, but a simple, yet profound, integration of doctrine and discipline towards an authentic Christianity through an intentionally comprehensive program of preaching and small groups.

In John’s “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists” much of the pamphlet addresses organization and practices of the movement, particularly small group gatherings for spiritual nurture. In response to pleas for guidance and prayer, John facilitated regular gatherings of interested persons. Only one condition was required of those requesting admission, “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.”<sup>61</sup> These gatherings resembled religious societies common among the Church of England, as well as Pietists, and grew into networks of Methodist circuits across Britain.<sup>62</sup> These gatherings, namely united societies, specifically class meetings alongside penitent, select and other bands, provided opportunities for early Methodist lay persons, including women, to assume leadership roles such as class and band leaders, lay

---

<sup>60</sup> Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount IV,” I.1, *Works* 1:533-34, referred to in Maddox, “Formation for Christian Leadership,” 124. For a discussion of spirituality in theological education, see David Lowes Watson, “Spiritual Formation in Ministerial Training, The Wesleyan Paradigm: Mutual Accountability,” *The Christian Century* (February 6-13, 1985), 122-24. For further discussion of Methodist societies from a Latin American perspective, see Mortimer Arias, “Methodist Societies in the Eighteenth Century and Christian Base Communities in the Twentieth Century,” in Theodore Runyon, ed., *Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Theological Consultation* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 227-39.

<sup>61</sup> “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” I.8, *Works*, 9: 257 and see “Rules of the United Societies,” *Works*, 8: 269-71.

<sup>62</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 21. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge has its roots in the religious societies founded by Anthony Horneck in the 1670s, the English counterparts to the collegia pietatis organized by Jacob Spener.

assistants, stewards, and sick visitors.<sup>63</sup> More importantly, such small groups provided a context in which most early Methodists experienced spiritual conversions facilitated by consistent practices of piety and mercy.

The General Rules for the United Societies describe the gatherings as “a company of men [and women] having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, receive words of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”<sup>64</sup> The one condition for admission remained, “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.”

Continuance in the societies then required a bearing of fruits to that effect facilitated by the following three general rules: (1) by doing no harm, and avoiding evil of every kind; (2) by doing good, and (3) by attending upon the ordinances of God.<sup>65</sup>

The latter consisted of what John often referred to as the means of grace or works of piety and mercy. In the context of bands and classes, individuals encouraged one another in their Christian journeys through public and private prayer, study of scripture, confession, and fasting, as well as praise and worship. These activities, also known categorically as works of piety, were means of grace through which individuals might come to know faith in Jesus Christ. Participation in works of piety also provided avenues through which faith might be nurtured and encouraged to grow. In addition to works of piety, members of religious societies, classes, and bands also engaged in works of mercy,

---

<sup>63</sup> “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” II. 5, IX. 2, X. 2, XI. 4, *Works*, 9: 254-80.

<sup>64</sup> See also “Rules of the United Societies,” *Works*, 8: 269-71.

<sup>65</sup> The General Rules were meant for mutual support, but were also enforced, serving as a guide for accountability specifically in the Newcastle societies of 1743. The General Rules are protected as formal doctrine within the UMC tradition and appear in the UMC Discipline. General Rules of United Societies, *UM Book of Discipline* (2004), 72-74.

addressing the bodies as well as souls of persons. Whereas works of piety emphasized individual spiritual growth, works of mercy included feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the imprisoned, sick and afflicted. Interestingly, John prioritized works of mercy over works of piety.<sup>66</sup>

While John, Charles, and Whitefield attracted substantial crowds with their field preaching, these venues were less often occasions for spiritual experiences, though they sometimes contributed to an individual's awakening to an ongoing process of conversion.<sup>67</sup> According to Thomas Albin's illuminating study, lay people were more influential than clergy in facilitating key spiritual experiences such as conviction or awakening, new birth, and sanctification.<sup>68</sup> The social environment of the new birth was significantly different from that of the awakenings, with the most frequent social context for early Methodist conversion occurring in solitude, followed by small groups.<sup>69</sup> In Albin's study, most individuals began participating in Methodist societies prior to their experience of the new birth. While more than half received a spiritual experience within the first year, one individual in the study received such an experience after 48 years, creating a mean of two years and four months between conviction and conversion in this study for overall time participating in society prior to receiving a spiritual experience.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Maddox, "Formation for Christian Leadership," 122. See also Sermon 16, "Means of Grace," *Works*, 1: 376-97.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas R. Albin, "An Empirical Study of Early Methodist Spirituality," in Theodore Runyon, ed., *Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Theological Consultation* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 277-78.

<sup>68</sup> Albin, "An Empirical Study," 277. In relation to awakening and conviction, lay people are mentioned three times more frequently than clergy, twice as often in relation to the new birth, and four times more often in relation to sanctification. Interestingly, in many accounts there is no human catalyst identified. See Albin, 278.

<sup>69</sup> Albin, "An Empirical Study," 278.

<sup>70</sup> Albin, "An Empirical Study," 278.

Regular preaching in societies, at times by lay persons, complemented the singing of hymns and other means of grace with a consistent exposure to doctrine inviting individuals to cultivate deeper spiritual formation and to bear fruit in Christian discipleship.<sup>71</sup> John legally named Charles his successor in 1746 in charge of Methodism upon his death.<sup>72</sup> As second in command, Charles often cared for lay preachers, including recruitment and examination.<sup>73</sup> Charles felt that participants in societies were less likely to wander, and those already departed might return, if skilled competent preachers were maintained.<sup>74</sup> In 1751, John left the examination of preachers largely to Charles with instructions to discern “grace before gifts.” However, Charles was disturbed by a seeming proliferation of insufficient gifts among lay preachers.<sup>75</sup>

As Charles fulfilled his responsibility for “purging the preachers,” traveling through the Midlands and the North of England, his letters expressed a deep worry for the possible separation of Methodism from the Church of England.<sup>76</sup> His concern related to separation arose from a prevalence of lay preachers obtaining licenses as nonconformist ministers and administering the Lord’s Supper. Charles wrote to John Nelson, “Rather

---

<sup>71</sup> For an interesting and significant discussion of the role of doctrine in formation see John C. Cavadini, “Simplifying Augustine,” in John Van Engen, ed., *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 63-84.

<sup>72</sup> Frank Baker, “Charles Wesley’s Letters,” in ST Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian*, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992), 74. Charles’ status as successor was never revoked despite the brothers’ differences.

<sup>73</sup> Baker, “Charles Wesley’s Letters,” 75.

<sup>74</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 197.

<sup>75</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 182-84. See *Letters*, 26: 472-73) Charles concerns emerged particularly with regard to preachers in Ireland.

<sup>76</sup> Baker, “Charles Wesley’s Letters,” 79. Charles wrote many letters and John wrote “Ought we to separate...?” for the 1755 conference.

than see thee a dissenting minister, I wish to see thee smiling in thy coffin.”<sup>77</sup> Some lay preachers argued that their pastoral role would be strengthened if they were permitted to administer communion in the Methodist societies.<sup>78</sup> John encouraged Methodists to regularly receive communion in Anglican parish churches. For Charles, increased attendance at communion demonstrated the effectiveness of the early Methodist renewal movement and fulfillment of the evangelistic imperative shared by the brothers.<sup>79</sup> Many participants would not go to their parish churches, missing an opportunity to participate in a primary means of grace, unless lay preachers in societies enabled access to the sacrament, increasing the possibility of separation.<sup>80</sup> In addition to letters, Charles expressed his views on such lay preachers in a series of ten hymns published in 1758.<sup>81</sup>

John addressed accusations of schism in “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists.” To those who asked, “Is not this making a schism? Is not the joining these people together gathering Churches out of Churches?” He replied, “If you mean only gathering people out of buildings called churches, it is. But if you mean dividing Christians from Christians, and so destroying Christian fellowship, it is not...That which never existed cannot be destroyed.”<sup>82</sup> Both itinerant preachers and Anglican priests, John and Charles, though perhaps Charles more than John, were loyal Churchmen.<sup>83</sup> Some scholars seem to portray these two commitments, itinerant evangelical preaching and

---

<sup>77</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 206.

<sup>78</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 206-07.

<sup>79</sup> Leaver, “Charles Wesley and Anglicanism,” 165. See also Albin, “Charles Wesley’s Other Prose Writings,” 93 and Charles Wesley, “On the Weekly Sacrament.”

<sup>80</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 207.

<sup>81</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Charles Wesley Letter on Lay Preaching,” *Methodist History* 22:3 (April 1984), 200-202. For access to a selection of these hymns see Tyson, *Charles Wesley: A Reader* 404-407, 423-25.

<sup>82</sup> “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist,” I.11, *Works*, 9: 258.

<sup>83</sup> Church, “Charles Wesley—The Man,” 250-51.

loyalty to the Church of England, as a dichotomy, supposedly at odds with one another.<sup>84</sup> However, it seems plausible, even viable, that these relate directly to one another since the Methodists and their societies were a community within the Church of England hoping to spread scriptural holiness by calling the Church to repentance.<sup>85</sup>

### **“Give All You Can”: Early Methodist Practices of Wealth-sharing**

A study of Protestant denominations in the United States revealed as much as a 35% decline in benevolence giving since 1968. As American wealth has increased, giving as a percentage of total income has declined.<sup>86</sup> Some argue that a postponement of ethical awareness has also occurred, particularly among seeker oriented congregations, in the midst of an increasingly individualistic and consumer-driven context in which self-sacrifice and community responsibility have become unpopular or at least unneeded.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (London: Epworth Press, 1954, third edition), 228. Rattenbury argued that Charles' loyalty to the Church of England “had little influence on his evangelical theology.” While there is not enough room here to make a sustained response, this dismissal seems too swift. See also Church, “Charles Wesley—The Man,” 250.

<sup>85</sup> Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns*, 229. The loyalty of Charles to the Church of England was unbreakable and perhaps rather pathetic, because he was an irregular churchman—field preaching in opposition to the Bishop and first to administer the sacraments in Methodist preaching houses, yet he never actually disobeyed Episcopal commands. See Rattenbury, 230. See also Charles' poem, “Did we preach ourselves, or Christ the Lord?” mentioned by Rattenbury.

<sup>86</sup> John and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *Behind the Stained Glass Window: Money Dynamics in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1996). The Ronsvalle study surveyed twenty-nine Protestant denominations in the United States for statistics and practices from 1968-1995.

<sup>87</sup> For example, See Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), particularly 2-16; and Bishop Ken Carder, “Market and Mission: Competing Visions for Transforming Ministry” (Hickman Lectures, Duke Divinity School, October 2001).

The Wesleys' context was not entirely different from contemporary American Protestantism with the dawning of capitalism and the flourishing of England's colonial trade markets, though the majority of Methodists and English society were relatively poor. John consistently addressed issues of poverty, wealth and benevolence in his writing. Following scriptural themes, he encouraged generosity among Methodists of every socio-economic class. Scripture includes five hundred verses on prayer, less than five hundred verses on faith, yet over two thousand on money and possessions. Approximately 10% (228 verses) of the gospel texts focus upon the use of money.<sup>88</sup>

John was not interested in providing a systematized outline of his own economic ethic. However, by examining often repeated themes, Maddox suggests four cornerstones of John's message concerning wealth and possessions: (1) the source of all things is God and so all things belong to God; (2) earthly wealth has been placed in human hands to be stewarded on God's behalf; (3) God expects that we use what we are given to provide for our own necessities and then the necessities of others; and (4) to spend our God given resources on luxuries while others are in need of necessities is to misuse what God has given us.<sup>89</sup>

In his sermon, *On Use of Money*, John outlined the proper actions of a Christian approach toward wealth in his famous, and often misused quote, "Gain all you can, without hurting either yourself or your neighbour. . . Save all you can, by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire. . . Give all you can, or in other words

---

<sup>88</sup> James S. Hewitt, *Adult Bible Studies Teacher* (Nashville: Tyndale House Publishers), 1988. See also Sondra Wheeler, *Wealth as Peril and Obligation: The New Testament on Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>89</sup> Randy Maddox, "Visit the Poor': John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers," in Richard Heitzenrater, ed., *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 62.

give all you have to God.”<sup>90</sup> This is not, as is sometimes claimed, an endorsement for the laissez-faire capitalism introduced by Adam Smith.<sup>91</sup> John’s writings on similar economic themes, such as *Thoughts on the Scarcity of Provisions* (1773), were roughly contemporary with Smith’s publication of *Wealth of Nations* (1776). However, John Wesley and Adam Smith articulated different ultimate goals concerning economics.

Smith advocated the retention of wealth as the basic means of accumulating more wealth. John encouraged the gaining of wealth so that it could be shared among the kingdom of God.<sup>92</sup> In the sermon, *On Use of Money*, the first two points—make all you can and save all you can—John resonates with Smith’s advice for individuals to acquire capital. Even on the third point that once wealth has been acquired it must be used to best advantage, John and Smith agree. However, John turned this budding economic theory on its head with his last instruction to give all one can. For John, money is used to best advantage to meet the basic needs of one’s neighbor, and not simply used as a tool to accumulate more wealth. In a world where the rich get richer, Wesley admonished excess accumulation as theft from God. Wesley applied this definition with unyielding strictness, accusing those who accumulated wealth as stealing from the poor.

Do you not know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind. How can you, how dare you, defraud your Lord by applying it to any other purpose!<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Sermon 50, “The Use of Money,” *Works*, 2: 278-79.

<sup>91</sup> Maddox, “‘Visit the Poor’: John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers,” 62.

<sup>92</sup> Maddox, “‘Visit the Poor’: John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers,” 62-62.

<sup>93</sup> Ted Campbell, “The Image of Christ in the Poor: On the Medieval Roots of the Wesleys’ Ministry with the Poor,” in Richard Heitzenrater, ed., *The Poor and the People*

Wesley had quite a strict definition of wealth that can be found in his sermon on *The Danger of Increasing Riches*. In sum, if anyone held goods above the necessities then one was rich. Wesley applied this definition with unyielding strictness, accusing those who accumulated wealth as stealing from the poor.

John Wesley implemented a strict definition of wealth accumulation. Wealth is a gift from God, supplied to humanity to meet basic needs (food, shelter, clothing) and then to be given to others to assist in meeting their basic needs. Wesley saw this ordering not as a viable system of secular communalism, but rather as the requirement of God, lived out in the example of Christ. In his sermon, *The Good Steward*, Wesley makes this connection explicit.

But first supplying thy own reasonable wants [necessities], together with those of thy family; then restoring the remainder to me [God], through the poor, whom I had appointed to receive it; looking upon thyself as only one of that number of poor whose wants were to be supplied out of that part of my substance which I had placed in thy hands for this purpose; leaving the right of being supplied first, and the blessedness of giving rather than receiving?<sup>94</sup>

It is a significant point that one restores the gift of money to God through the poor. Once again Wesley had made clear the spiritual dimension of providing for physical necessities and the physical dimension of the spiritual life and growth. Money is a gift from God that is used for God's purposes. These purposes are outlined in scripture and modeled in the life of Christ.

---

*Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 53-54; quoted from Sermon 131, "The Danger of Increasing Riches," 12, *Works*, 4:184.

<sup>94</sup> Sermon 51, "The Good Steward," *Works*, 2: 295.

Opportunities within the Methodist renewal movement for demonstrating love of neighbor through works of mercy included charity schools, orphanages, medical clinics, shelters, meals, zero interest loans and other programs to help people meet their most basic needs and to better their condition.<sup>95</sup> Such programs were formed to assist people according to five general categories: (1) the impotent or helpless poor who needed the most basic necessities of food, shelter and clothing; (2) the unfortunate or able poor who needed assistance in bettering their economic situation; (3) the children who needed education for mind, body, and spirit; (4) for the literate but uneducated adults who could benefit from Wesley's publishing program; and (5) to help the poor and infirm with hospitals, pharmacies, and free medical advice.<sup>96</sup> It is important to note that Methodist efforts for assisting the poor initially targeted those within the Methodist societies.<sup>97</sup> This later expanded to some outside the movement through Stranger's Friend Societies.

In keeping with Wesley's idea of community after the example of Christ, he encouraged his wealthy patrons not merely to give money to the poor but also to become personally involved with their plight. Miss March had well grounded apprehensions about having physical contact and conversation with the poor. Wesley empathized with her objections but urged her to make such connections after the example of Christ.

Wesley was not asking her to befriend the poor but to:

visit the poor, the widow, the sick, the fatherless in their affliction; and this, although they should have nothing to recommend them but that they are bought with the blood of Christ. It is true that this is not pleasing to flesh and blood. There are a thousand circumstances usually attending it

---

<sup>95</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 321.

<sup>96</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, "The Poor and the People Called Methodists," in Richard Heitzenrater, ed., *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 34.

<sup>97</sup> Heitzenrater, "The Poor and the People Called Methodists," 32.

which shock the delicacy of our nature, or rather of our education. But yet the blessing which follows this labour of love will more than balance the cross (JWL, 6:208-9).<sup>98</sup>

Giving to those in need was not just a magnanimous gesture on behalf of the rich to succor the poor; it was a deep spiritual discipline that carried spiritual benefit to both giver and receiver.

Wealthy and poor alike were expected to participate in this discipline. In this way John Wesley universalized the response to poverty. All were expected to offer assistance, including the poor themselves, including the widow with her mites.<sup>99</sup> Added to Wesley's impressive personal record of giving, outlined in detail throughout his diaries, Wesley demanded that his followers give generously and often even when they themselves stood on the brink of poverty. John Wesley was so bold and so constant in his requests for money to be used on behalf of the poor that Charles Wesley complained.

How many collections think you has my brother made between Thursday evening and Sunday? No fewer than seven. Five this one day from the same poor exhausted people. He has no mercy on them, on the GIVING poor I mean; as if he was in haste to reduce them to the number of the RECEIVING poor.<sup>100</sup>

John's insistence upon strict financial discipline is one of the primary reasons Methodism did not attract a larger membership during his lifetime.<sup>101</sup> However, John was more interested in renewal through spreading scriptural holiness than large numbers. Such strictness eroded slightly over time and was greatly relaxed after John's death; a

---

<sup>98</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 252.

<sup>99</sup> Heitzenrater, "The Poor and the People Called Methodists," 36.

<sup>100</sup> "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," XIII.2, *Works*, 9:277.

<sup>101</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 321.

situation predicted by John as he neared the end of his life.<sup>102</sup> It does seem that by the 1760's, John softened his stance indicating that it was permissible to accumulate a bit beyond the bare necessities of life as long as this was not the primary goal being pursued.<sup>103</sup> In any case, there seems a strong correlation between the relaxing of expectations particularly related to wealth-sharing and the swelling of numbers among Methodists especially in the United States.

### **Renewing the Church: Conclusions**

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the early Methodist movement can offer resources to local congregations confronting obstacles to faithful and effective ministry practices such as: (1) preoccupation with rapid numerical growth to reverse the trend of membership decline, (2) lack of theological reflection, (3) disinterest in sustained Christian practices or spiritual disciplines, and (4) reluctance to engage the other particularly across socio-economic boundaries through wealth-sharing. Four aspects of the early Methodist movement that address these obstacles include:

- (1) *'Growth'*: While much of contemporary 'evangelism' is quantified by the rapid increase of local church attendance, the early Methodist movement, despite staggering numbers of listeners to open-air preaching, acknowledged a relatively slow, but steady, intense process of Christian formation in small group gatherings resulting in changed lives.
- (2) *Doctrine*: The doctrinal foundation of the Methodist movement did not prioritize technical distinctions. Instead, a simple authentic scriptural

---

<sup>102</sup> Jose Miguez Bonino, "'The Poor Will Always Be with You': Can Wesley Help Us Discover How Best to Serve 'Our Poor' Today?" in Richard Heitzenrater, ed., *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 184.

<sup>103</sup> Heitzenrater, "The Poor and the People Called Methodists," 30. An interesting note is that when Wesley married he greatly relaxed his stance on accumulation.

Christianity framed the movement. Exposure to doctrine, particularly through Charles' hymns evangelized and nurtured individuals in the Christian faith.

- (3) *Organization and practices*: The intentionality of the early Methodist movement's organization and practices, particularly classes, bands, and lay preachers, emerged from doctrinal frames for the purpose of facilitating intentional and meaningful growth among participants.
- (4) *Wealth-sharing*: Theological consideration of economics and its implications for personal and communal faith was an important if not essential discipline required of early Methodists that contributed significantly to changed lives—among both givers and receivers.

While there is not a quick and easy recipe for spreading scriptural holiness, or in more recent language within United Methodist, to make disciples for the transformation of the world, Christian communities of accountability grounded in scripture, doctrine, and faithful practices cannot but offer an evangelistic witness to their neighborhoods and the world.