

John Wesley's Understanding of Christian Mission as the Key to his Doctrine of the Church

One of the more important consequences of postmodernism is that it has made us aware of the importance of narrative for grappling with issues of identity. Just as people have stories and family histories to relate who they are, so too do movements. Thus before the question of how Methodism can minister to a twenty-first century world can be properly addressed, it is imperative that this movement be examined in terms of its own ecclesial identity, especially in light of its origins as an evangelical, reforming movement within the catholic church in general and Anglicanism in particular. That is, Wesley's ecclesiology must be understood first, before the church/world relation itself can be properly assessed. Indeed, to neglect or fail in this endeavor is to run the risk of having some other story or narrative chart a course that is not Methodism's own.

John Wesley's Doctrine of the Church

Frank Baker in his *John Wesley and the Church of England* has posited that Wesley had a two-fold understanding of the church: an institutional one (that hailed from Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism) and a more pragmatic and functional one (that was informed, among other things, by eighteenth century evangelicalism). In light of this, it will be demonstrated not only that Wesley held these two elements in tension throughout much of his ministry but also that his functional view eventually came to predominate, especially as the great evangelical revival progressed. Thus, violating parish boundaries (and Anglican sensibilities), employing lay preachers, and ordaining suitable laborers for the field were a few of the more important ways in which Wesley sought to promote what he himself called real, Scriptural Christianity, the heart of Methodist mission. On the other hand, leaders of the institutional church, bishops and priests alike, were aghast at Wesley's apparent lack of respect for appropriate order and even in a few instances for duly established authority in the church.

Though it has been recently claimed by no one less than a bishop that "One of the

least well-defined areas of United Methodist doctrine is its ecclesiology,"¹ such a statement would not be an apt description of the thought of John Wesley. To be sure, the father of Methodism thought often of the nature of the church and its proper parameters as he considered his own ministry, his distinct call, of spreading scriptural holiness across the land. What is particularly fascinating about Wesley's views are the number of levels of his reflection since he realized that "a more ambiguous word than this, the Church, is scarce to be found in the English language."² Accordingly, at times "the church" is taken to mean a building, a congregation, or a "body of people united together in the service of God."³ In many of his writings, Wesley prefers this last sense and such a body can be as small as two or three believers gathering together in the name of Christ or as large as a catholic conception that embraces "all the persons upon the face of the earth, who answer the character here given."⁴ Again, the church encompasses "the whole body of true believers, whether on earth or in paradise,"⁵ the church militant as well as the church triumphant. But just what is this character that defines the universal or catholic church wherever believers are found? It is to be "one body, united by 'one spirit'; having 'one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all,'"⁶ a view that breaks out of all parochial conceptions in order to affirm the universality of the church that in its very essence as the redeemed community transcends a partisan and divisive spirit. The rallying cry is neither Paul nor Apollos, but Christ.

Though Wesley clearly affirmed the catholicity of the church, as an heir of the

¹Scott Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 246.

²Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vols. 1-4. *The Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 3:46. (Of the Church).

³Ibid. (Of the Church).

⁴Ibid., 3:48. (Of the Church).

⁵John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers), p. 592. (Heb. 12:22).

⁶Outler, *Sermons*, 3:50. (Of the Church).

Anglican Reformation he also maintained a "reformist" view as present in Article XIX of the historic *Thirty-Nine Articles* which states: "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same."⁷ Such a definition of the church, especially as employed during the Reformation, not only made allowance for and rendered intelligible the rise of the great national churches during the sixteenth century, the Church of England among them, but it also functioned as a standard to distinguish error from corrupting practice or teaching. Wesley affirmed such meanings as well, in giving his assent to this article, but also made it clear that he would not, when pressed, defend the accuracy of this definition. In other words, Wesley's catholic sensibilities were so strong that he would not "exclude from the Church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines...are sometimes yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations, in which the sacraments are not 'duly administered.'"⁸ More to the point, Wesley had in mind all those *real* Christians who were a part of the Roman Catholic Church whose sanctified life would be clearly evident except to those who were marked by various degrees of bigotry or party spirit. Given these judgments, Outler contended that Wesley felt free to interpret the XIX Article "more comprehensively than its authors had ever intended."⁹

Part of the substance of Wesley's catholic and generous spirit was informed by his attention to the end or goal of religion in terms of the inculcation of holy love among members of the Body of Christ who may be confused or at times even mistaken in some

⁷Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 499. In his treatise *On the Councils and Churches* (1539), as Avery Dulles points out, Luther expanded this to seven notes: "1. The preaching of the true word of God 2. The proper administration of baptism 3. The correct form of the Lord's Supper 4. The power of the keys 5. The lawful vocation and ordination of ministers 6. Prayer and the singing of psalms in the vernacular 7. Persecutions." Cf. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 1978), p. 125

⁸Outler, *Sermons*, 3:52. (Of the Church).

⁹Ibid., 3:45-46. (Of the Church).

of their beliefs. For example, though Wesley clearly thought that William Law, his one time mentor, was in error with respect to the doctrine of justification by faith, such a mistake did not prevent him from actually being justified. Indeed, it seems somewhat odd that in all of the definitions of the church explored so far not one places an appropriate emphasis on holiness as characterizing the body of Christ in a distinct way. To correct this deficiency Wesley harkened back to the language of the Apostles' Creed in several of his writings in order to affirm the reality of "the *holy* catholic church." And he reveals the source of such holiness in the following observation:

The Church is called holy, because Christ, the Head of it, is holy....Nay, the shortest and the plainest reason that can be given, and the only true one, is, — The Church is called holy, because it is holy, because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as He that called them is holy.¹⁰

Elsewhere Wesley indicates that the Apostle Paul defined the church specifically in terms of holiness or sanctification by addressing his First Letter to the Corinthians "To them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus..."¹¹ As such, those who are a part of the *ecclesia* who have been called out of the world and who are sanctified, at least initially so, are aptly called saints. Other elements that Wesley believed were integral to a proper understanding of the church are found in one of his more pungent and succinct definitions as he reflected on the meaning of Acts 5:10: "And here is a native specimen of a New Testament Church: called by the gospel, grafted into Christ by baptism, animated by love, united by all kind of fellowship, and disciplined by the death of Ananias and Sapphira."¹²

These various levels of Wesley's definition of the church can be expressed in

¹⁰Ibid., 3:55-56. (Of the Church). And Wesley rejected the "primacy" of Peter, a claim often tied to the substantiation of the papacy in his comments on Acts 15:23, "The whole conduct of this affair plainly shows that the Church in those days had no conception of St. Peter's primacy, or of his being the chief judge in controversies." Cf. Wesley, *NT Notes*, p. 318 (Acts 15:23).

¹¹Ibid., 3:47. (Of the Church).

¹²Wesley, *NT Notes*, p. 287. (Acts 5:10).

terms of a larger tension or conjunction. On the one hand, Wesley considers the church as an institution marked by the proper preaching of the Word of God and where the sacraments are duly administered. This institutional or "objective" definition allows Wesley and the Methodist movement to be in conversation with the broader catholic church for the purpose of reform. On the other hand, Wesley defined the church not simply in terms of institutions and objective elements, but also in terms of flesh and blood people, members of the Body of Christ who as a peculiar people are holy precisely because their Savior is holy. As such, the church is a living organism, the Body of Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit, and called to that holiness that befits the saints. Outler characterized this dialectical tension embedded in Wesley's overall view as a "blend of Anglican and Anabaptist ecclesiologies."¹³ And Snyder, for his part, considered it in terms of "the Catholic tradition mediated through Anglicanism and the Believer's Church tradition mediated mainly through the Moravian Brethren."¹⁴

Yet another way of considering this conjunction is in terms of institutional and functional emphases whereby the public church is from time to time called to reform in light of the task of raising up a holy people who are animated by the love of God and neighbor. For if the church is no longer aiming at the inculcation of holy love, as the point of it all in the lives of its members, if it fails to demonstrate the universality of such love by being deflected with parochial concerns, then in Wesley's judgment it has lost its way no matter what institutional or objective elements remain in place. In such instances reform, in line with a functional understanding of the church, becomes a *necessity*, a word that Wesley often employed to justify several of the initiatives of Methodism.

The Church in Decline

Wesley's ecclesiology, of course, must also be viewed against the larger backdrop

¹³Outler, *Sermons*, 3:45-46. (Of the Church). Dulles offers a number of models in which to explore the doctrine of the church: 1) Institution 2) Mystical Communion 3) Sacrament 4) Herald 5) Servant. Cf. Dulles, *Models*, p. 34-102.

¹⁴Howard Albert Snyder, "Pietism, Moravianism, and Methodism as Renewal Movements: A Comparative and Thematic Study" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Notre Dame, 1983), p. 238.

of his preferred way of reading the history of the church, what scholars call "historiography." As will be apparent shortly Wesley's interpretation of the story of the church is by and large a Protestant one where periods of decline in the broader institutional church are met by a number of reforming movements. But such decline was not so late as the Middle Ages—as in some other views. Instead, for Wesley, though the church began in universality and innocence on the day of Pentecost, where even different languages and traditions did not divide, the "mystery of iniquity," as he puts it, soon began to have its affect on the early community of faith through the greed and lying of Ananias and Sapphira. Again, even before the end of the Apostolic age the mystery of iniquity began to work "in the Ministers as well as the people."¹⁵ And if 'the state of the Church in the very first century was bad,' Wesley observes, "we cannot suppose it was any better in the second."¹⁶ In short, the tempers or dispositions of the heart of these Christians were unfortunately "exactly the same with those of their heathen neighbors."¹⁷

Three major elements, according to Wesley, make up this narrative of decline. First of all, the universality of the gospel, the embrace of the neighbor in holy love who heretofore was deemed simply "the other," was quickly marred by partiality and an incipient tribalism whereby particular groups preferred their *own* members not only to the detriment of others but also to the good of the entire community. Again, partiality and division crept into the body of Christ in which "too much regard for those of our own side [arose]; and too little for others, though equally worthy."¹⁸ Clearly Wesley understood the serious nature of partiality in that such a prejudgment in his estimation always entailed subtle forms of idolatry in which some penultimate value (class, race, economic status, culture, language or denomination) was made ultimate. In short, partiality strikes at the very heart of the gospel, at the very substance of a catholicity manifested in the universal love of God and neighbor.

¹⁵Outler, *Sermons*, 3:469. (On Attending the Church Service).

¹⁶Ibid., 2:461. (The Mystery of Iniquity).

¹⁷Ibid. 2:461. (The Mystery of Iniquity).

¹⁸Ibid., 2:456. (The Mystery of Iniquity). Bracketed material is mine.

Second, Wesley's historiography is similar, at least in some respects, to Anabaptist and Free Church models in that the figure of Constantine, Roman emperor from the fourth century, weighs heavily in his analysis. And though Eusebius of Caesarea, the father of Church History, looked favorably on Constantine, an emperor who in several ways favored the church, Wesley's view, on the other hand, is far more complicated and is marked by considerable irony. "Constantine's calling himself a Christian, and pouring that flood of wealth and honour on the Christian Church, the Clergy in particular," Wesley writes, "was productive of more evil to the Church than all the ten persecutions put together."¹⁹ Put another way, the power, riches and honor that Constantine heaped on the church led not to its flourishing, as some had expected, but to its diminishment by undermining its integrity, call and very purpose. Add to this Wesley's observation that during the fourth century the church and the State were so "strangely and unnaturally blended together," [that] Christianity and Heathenism were so thoroughly incorporated with each other,"²⁰ and we can begin to appreciate why Wesley preferred the Ante-Nicene period of the church to all others, a judgment duplicated among many of his fellow Anglicans.

Moreover, in Wesley's reading this decline brought about by Constantine was not reversed in any significant way until the sixteenth century when God raised up a number of prophetic witnesses to call the broader catholic church back to its first love. "Such has been the deplorable state of the Christian Church from the time of Constantine till the Reformation,"²¹ Wesley observes. Thus, the mystery of iniquity in the form of "human inventions added to the word; mere outside performances put in the room of faith and love; [as well as] other mediators besides the man Christ Jesus,"²² all of these barnacles,

¹⁹Ibid., 3:450. (Of Former Times). In his sermon, "The Mystery of Iniquity," Wesley remarks that "Persecution never did, never could, give any lasting wound to genuine Christianity." Cf. Outler, *Sermons*, 2:462-63. (The Mystery of Iniquity).

²⁰Ibid., 3:450. (Of Former Times). Bracketed material is mine.

²¹Ibid., 2:464. (The Mystery of Iniquity).

²²Wesley, *NT Notes*, p. 535. (1 Thessalonians 2:7). For a basic understanding of Wesley's reading of history in contrast to that of the historians of the Enlightenment Cf.

so to speak, that had accrued on the ark of salvation over time, and in a context of wealth, power and honor, began to be graciously stripped away during the sixteenth century and thereafter. Indeed, Wesley was so positive about the work of the Reformers, especially in terms of the elevation of moral life, that he pointed out on one occasion: "ever since the Reformation, and particularly in the present century, the behavior of the Clergy in general is greatly altered for the better."²³

Third, the riches that flow from the church being preferred by the state, the mixing of Christ and culture, a holy way and a worldly one, is one of the most significant factors leading to the demise of the church's witness. However, the external factor of being favored by the state in both honor and power must also be seen in terms of some of the internal elements of the Christian faith itself, which if not checked by discipline and grace, can readily lead to decline. In fact, according to Wesley wherever "*true* Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches!"²⁴ Therefore Wesley's pastoral counsel of gaining and saving all that one can, as present in his sermon, "The Use of Money," must be matched by giving all one can in order to prevent the specter of riches. "As money increases," he pointedly remarks, "so does the love of it and always will, without a miracle of grace."²⁵

Though Wesley's definition of what it is to be rich has been hailed by some Methodists as remarkably helpful,²⁶ others are not so convinced. The claim that anyone who has more than the bare necessities of life, and a little left over, is rich puts forth a definition that is not a part of any reputable economic theory past or present. In a real sense, this is an "ecclesiastical" definition of wealth, preoccupied with a peculiar understanding of humility and pride, that emerged before the full weight of Adam Smith's

Ken MacMillan, "John Wesley and the Enlightened Historians," *Methodist History* 38, no. 2 (January 2000): 121-132.

²³Outler, *Sermons*, 3:470. (On Attending the Church Service).

²⁴Ibid., 4:95. (Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity). Emphasis is mine.

²⁵Ibid., 2:468. (The Mystery of Iniquity).

²⁶See Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

Wealth of Nations, produced in 1776, was felt in Europe and elsewhere.²⁷ Arguing ostensibly from a larger theme of proper stewardship, Wesley posited a "zero sum" world in which the maxim, "if the poor have too little it must be because the rich have too much," by and large ruled the day. As such he not only failed to recognize how capital actually works in a growing economy, even in a merchantilist one, but his concern for stewardship, of what he called "robbing the poor," often devolved upon such petty matters as the size and shape of women's bonnets (and he forgets that poor workers often made these accessories) or upon his favorite moral foibles of censure, the consumption of alcohol among them, as reflected in his treatise, "Thoughts on The Present Scarcity of Provisions."²⁸

The stark, even trenchant, nature of Wesley's economic judgments is mitigated somewhat in his realization that proper stewardship does indeed entail "laying up treasures on earth," in order to take care of dependents when workers, either through illness or age, are no longer able to provide an income. And he noted in a similar fashion that people may have more than the necessities of life and yet not be rich simply because they are in debt.²⁹ Beyond this, Wesley was astute enough not to draw an exact equation between economic status and a soteriological one, as is so often done today, and he even noted on one occasion that "it is no more sinful to be rich than to be poor."³⁰ But he immediately added, lest there be misunderstanding, "It is dangerous beyond expression."³¹ That danger consisted, first of all, in the corruption of holy tempers which make up the substance of real, vital religion. "Have they [riches] not hurt your

²⁷J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1660-1832* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 123.

²⁸Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), 11: 53. (Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions).

²⁹Outler, *Sermons*, 4:179. (The Danger of Increasing Riches).

³⁰Ibid., 4:11. (Dives and Lazarus).

³¹Ibid. (Dives and Lazarus).

already, have they not wounded you in the tenderest part, by slackening, if not utterly destroying your "hunger and thirst after righteousness,"³² and thereby undermining humility, meekness, patience, works of mercy and piety?³³ Second, riches corrupt the church itself not only because they are "a hindrance to the very first fruit of faith, namely the love of God....and neighbor,"³⁴ but also because they are a temptation of "Atheism...even to an entire forgetfulness of God, as if there was no such Being in the universe."³⁵

In short, even though Wesley perhaps set the standard for what constitutes riches far too low, such that those barely making ends meet were often identified as "rich," his larger concerns of proper stewardship, concern for the poor, and the realization that wealth can easily lead to idolatry and thereby corrupt the church were vital counsels then as now.

Methodism as a Reform of the Church

When Methodism arose at Oxford in 1729 as two young men saw that that they could not be saved without holiness,³⁶ they had no intention of establishing a new church but of reforming an old one. "God then thrust them out," Wesley notes, "utterly against their will, to raise up a holy people."³⁷ That this work or mission was a reforming movement within the larger church is evident in Wesley's assessment of Methodism in 1745 when he quipped: "When hath religion, I will not say since the Reformation, but since the time of Constantine the Great, made so large a progress in any nation, within so small a space?"³⁸ In other words, the nominal, formalistic Christianity that had been

³²Ibid. 3:241. (The Danger of Riches). Bracketed material is mine.

³³Ibid. For a "Marxist" reading of Wesley's economics, and one that questions the right to private property, Cf. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor*, p. 98.

³⁴Ibid., 3:521-22. (On Riches).

³⁵Ibid., 3:523. (On Riches).

³⁶Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), 8:300. (Minutes of Several Conversations).

³⁷Ibid. (Minutes of Several Conversations).

³⁸Gerald R. Cragg, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 11. *The Appeals to Men*

ushered in since the time of Constantine, with all its wealth, power and privileges, was now being reversed, at least in some sense, by the "grain of mustard-seed....sown near London."³⁹ Schooled at the Epworth rectory on the importance of the primitive Fathers, especially the writers of the first three centuries, Wesley next esteemed the Church of England, despite its difficulties, as best of all, revealing once again his distinct Protestant historiography as well as the necessity of reform.⁴⁰

Even as a young man, John Wesley realized that great national churches, like the Church of England, though they insured the numerical predominance of a particular version of the faith, often left nominal Christianity in their wake. That is, the power of religion did not always follow its form. Indeed, for many in the eighteenth century, to be an English person was to be a Christian, so intermingled were the aspects of nation and faith. However, as early as 1725, the year in which Wesley clearly saw the end or goal of religion as holiness, he challenged such glib assumptions among his compatriots and entreated John Griffiths, for example, "to let me have the pleasure of making him a whole Christian, to which I knew he was at least half persuaded already."⁴¹ And a few years later, in 1734, in an important letter to his father Samuel, the young son complained that the bane of piety is "the company of good sort of men, lukewarm Christians (as they are called), persons that have a great concern for, but no sense of, religion."⁴²

John Wesley's preoccupation with the theme of real Christianity, historically

of Reason and Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 11:276. (An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II).

³⁹Outler, *Sermons*, 3452-453. (Of Former Times).

⁴⁰Rupert E. Davies, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 9. *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 9:538. (Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church).

⁴¹Frank Baker, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vols. 25, 26. *The Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 25:209. (To Mrs. Susanna Wesley, January 24, 1726/7).

⁴²*Ibid.*, 25:400. (To Revd. Samuel Wesley, Sen., December 10, 1734). For other critical references to Constantine, Cf. Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), 6:261, 7:26,164, and 276.

speaking, was undoubtedly reminiscent of the work of Johann Arndt and of such early German Pietists as Spener and Francke. In his *Wahres Christenthum* (True Christianity), for example, a work which Wesley saw fit to include in the first volume of his *Christian Library* in 1749. Arndt had highlighted the themes of personal reform, the repudiation of stale intellectualism, criticism of doctrinal provincialism, and the importance of sanctification more than a century prior to Wesley.⁴³ Moreover, during his middle years, in a way characteristic of Continental Pietism, Wesley linked the motif of real Christianity to inward religion and reform, to those dispositions and tempers of the heart which mark the regenerate believer and constitute the proper Christian faith.⁴⁴ For example, in his sermon "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Sixth," Wesley underscores that Christ "has laid before us those dispositions of soul which constitute real Christianity: the inward tempers contained in that holiness 'without which no man shall see the Lord....'"⁴⁵

During the latter part of his career, Wesley continued to highlight the distinction between nominal and real Christians, and pointed out in his sermon, "The New Creation,"

⁴³Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). For a detailed examination of the influence of the early German Pietists on the thought of John Wesley, Cf. Kenneth J. Collins, "The Influence of Early German Pietism on John Wesley," *The Covenant Quarterly* Vol. 48, No. 4 (November 1990): 23-42.

⁴⁴Part of the problem with some contemporary assessments of Wesley's doctrine of regeneration is that the Methodist leader's understanding of the degrees of this work of grace is refashioned, with the result that regeneration is linked, at its minimum, not with the new birth, as it should be, but with prevenient grace. Here the concept of regeneration becomes so broad that it even includes the initial restoring activity of grace, the awakening of faculties, in terms of unrepentant sinners. Cf. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1994), 159. For Wesley's description of degrees of regeneration, Cf. Davies, *Societies*, 64; Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 11:421; Ward, *Journals*, 19:32; and Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley, The Library of Protestant Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 140.

⁴⁵Outler, *Sermons*, 1:572-73. (Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse VI). Compare John Wesley's estimation of inward religion and its linkage to real Christianity with Jennings's virtual abandonment of this linkage as expressed in his piece "John Wesley Against Aldersgate." Cf. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., "John Wesley against

employing a familiar rhetoric by now, that the former "have the form of godliness without the power."⁴⁶ Clues, by the way, as to when Wesley himself determined in his own mind to be a real Christian are found in a late sermon, "In What Sense We are to Leave the World," where he indicates again the significance of the year 1725: "When it pleased God to give me a settled resolution to be not a nominal but a real Christian (being about two and twenty years of age) my acquaintance were as ignorant of God as myself."⁴⁷ And when Wesley once again reflected back on the Oxford Methodists in a letter to Henry Brooke in 1786, he avowed that their design was nothing less than to be "Bible Christians."⁴⁸ And the following year, in his sermon "Of Former Times," Wesley revealed that the goal of the "Holy Club" was above all to help each other to be "real Christians."⁴⁹ The goal of Methodism, in other words, was not to form any new sect, but "to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."⁵⁰

Though eighteenth-century Anglicanism had its members who were either doctrinally confused (at times confounding justification and sanctification) or who were living far below the graces for which Christ died, nevertheless, it would be a mistake to paint the Church of England in the darkest colors possible in order to display the light of reforming Methodism. For one thing, many Anglican clergy such as Bishop Gibson were devoted, disciplined and remarkably moral. For them a "*gradual* improvement of grace

Aldersgate," *Quarterly Review* 8 (Fall 1988): 3-22.

⁴⁶Ibid., 2:501. (The New Creation). See also 3:152.

⁴⁷Ibid., 3:152. (In What Sense We are to Leave the World). A few years earlier, in 1780, Wesley strongly associated real Christianity and happiness. In his sermon, "Spiritual Worship," for example, he declares: "none but a Christian is happy; none but a real, inward Christian." Cf. Outler, *Sermons*, 3:99-100.

⁴⁸John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 7:331. (To Henry Brooke, June 14, 1786).

⁴⁹Outler, *Sermons*, 3:452-453. (Of Former Times). See also Wesley's "Thoughts on a Late Phenomenon," where he reveals that the goal of the Oxford Methodists was to be "scriptural Christians." Cf. Davies, *Societies*, 9:535.

⁵⁰Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 8:299. (Minutes of Several Conversations).

and goodness...was a better route to spiritual enlightenment than the "Madness and Enthusiasm,"⁵¹ of the Methodists. In other words, the tensions of Wesley's reforming impulses as well as his distinct way of reading the history of the church are far more subtle than some have imagined. Such elements reveal that Methodism challenged, at least at some points, the very "catholic" form that the church had taken across the centuries beyond its most obvious corruptions. Thus after reading "The General Delusion of Christians with regard to Prophecy," in 1750 Wesley became fully convinced of what he had long suspected, namely, that "the Montanists, in the second and third centuries, were real, scriptural Christians,"⁵² even though the old catholic church had condemned them. Wesley offers some clues to the dynamics and motivations of this condemnation in his following observation:

That the grand reason why the miraculous gifts were so soon withdrawn, was not only that faith and holiness were well-nigh lost; but that dry, formal, orthodox men began even then to ridicule whatever gifts they had not themselves, and to decry them all as either madness or imposture.⁵³

In a similar fashion, Wesley remarks, "What the Donatists were, I do not know; but I suspect they were the *real Christians* of that age; and were therefore served by St. Augustine and his warm adherents, as the Methodists are now by their zealous adversaries."⁵⁴ That is, the relation between the Donatists and the ancient catholic church parallels that of eighteenth-century Methodism to the Church of England. And though

⁵¹David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 33. The gradualism and the emphasis on process in Maddox's eastern orthodox paradigm, the principal lens he employs to interpret Wesley, has more in common with eighteenth century Anglicanism than it does with the Methodist revival of the same century. Cf. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1994), p. 160 and 179.

⁵²Reginald W. Ward, and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 20. *Journals and Diaries I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 356.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 11:453. (An Answer to the Rev. Mr. Dodd). Emphasis is mine.

Wesley elsewhere sided with many of the catholic theological judgments entailed in the Donatist controversy and did not doubt the legitimacy of a sacrament due to the moral or spiritual state of its celebrant, he was nevertheless astute enough to realize that this judgment, though necessary, had the un-intended consequence of not only strengthening the claims of formalism and an *ex oper operato* view of the sacraments but also of spawning some of the very elements (the sanctity of ministers in a sacramental context in one sense is irrelevant) that can easily lead to nominal Christianity. Simply put, reform is necessary not only when the church so obviously gets it wrong through corruption and abuse, but it may also be required when the church gets it right—due to the unintended consequences of appropriate and necessary judgments. This is a dynamic that Wesley clearly understood in his ongoing concern for the proper Christian faith. And when a great national communion such as the Church of England was reluctant to undergo the course of action prescribed by Wesley and the Methodists, she "handed the world-be physician his coat and hat, [though] he became the more eager to cure the patient in spite of herself."⁵⁵

The Influence of German Pietism and Moravianism

In this ongoing endeavor of reform of the mother church, Wesley and the Methodists were aided by the insights of two other reforming movements: Pietism and Moravianism. These communions of faith demonstrated both in thought and practice how an intentional and committed group of Christians could be within a church with a gracious and holy purpose without raising the specter of schism. Some of the common elements of these vital movements entailed "an emphasis on the new birth, intensity of personal religious experience, a focus on personal piety, holiness, and discipline, an emphasis on Scripture, primitivism and an "opposite element" regarding the established church, and religious idealism."⁵⁶ And Wesley's ecclesiology is unintelligent apart from

⁵⁵Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1970), p. 52.

⁵⁶Howard Albert Snyder, "Pietism, Moravianism, and Methodism as Renewal Movements: A Comparative and Thematic Study" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Notre Dame, 1983), p. 4-5.

their contributions.

Anthony Horneck (1641-1697), a German Reformed Pietist who was born in the Palatinate, planted the seeds of the religious society movement in England not long after he arrived in 1661. As a minister at Savoy and with discipline in mind, Horneck advocated the society concept, not in a divisive way, but as a means "of regulating and modeling the church's adherence to the primitive faith."⁵⁷ In his writings (*The Happy Ascetik*, *The Sirenes*, and *Delight and Judgment* among them) this earnest pastor held up the early church as a model for contemporaries to emulate, a primitivism that Wesley shared as well. Such an appeal garnered a hearing in some corners of the Church of England, especially among those who cherished the writings of the early church fathers, and the religious society movement was the result.⁵⁸ From this movement, came "the Society for the Reformation of Manners (1691), the Society for Prompting Christian Knowledge, or SPCK (1698), and its sister organization, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), in 1701."⁵⁹ Samuel Wesley, Sr. was an advocate as well as a participant in the religious society movement and he passed along such an interest to his son, John, who became a corresponding member of the SPCK in August, 1732, while he was at Oxford.⁶⁰

Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705), an Alsace native, was the first among the Pietists associated with Halle to make use of *collegia*, small cell groups for the revitalization of the Christian faith, even though neither conventicles nor the idea of *ecclesiola in ecclesia* was original to him.⁶¹ In 1670 Spener established a *collegia pietatis* at Frankfort am Main for the purpose of providing, "the intimacy and discipline of

⁵⁷Kelly D Carter, "The High Church Roots of Wesley's Appeal to Primitive Christianity," *Restoration Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (June 23, 2005): 8.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁹Snyder, "Pietism, Moravianism, and Methodism, p. 120.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 121.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 72. Snyder offers seven frameworks to explore the structure of renewal movements, ranging from *ecclesiola in ecclesia* to Catholic/Anabaptist typology. See p. 11 ff.

community which [would] contribute to the health of the whole church."⁶² And the design of these societies can be seen, in part, in a seminal and prophetic homily preached by Spener in 1669 in which he inquired:

O, what good it would effect if good friends would come together on Sundays, and instead of taking up glasses, cards, or dice would partake either of a book from which they could read something edifying for everyone or would repeat something they had heard in the sermon and each one would remember something that would help another therein, so that they might have some profit from it.⁶³

The nature of Spener's *collegia pietatis* was largely conservative, and he was more interested in the reform of existing ecclesiastical structures and life than in their overthrow. Thus Spener was not a revolutionary nor a radical like Labadie, and although he was troubled with certain aspects of a "national" church--like its uncanny ability to promote nominal Christianity--he nevertheless gave it his tacit support by prohibiting the celebration of the sacraments in the *collegia* in a way that portended Wesley's refusal to allow his lay preachers to do likewise.⁶⁴ But bear in mind that Spener substantiated the creation of such groups on the basis of the well-worn Lutheran claim of the priesthood of all believers. Wesley assumed a similar appeal though he defended his employment of lay preachers, in particular, by an appeal to a distinction between ordinary and extraordinary messengers.

Opposition to the Frankfurt *collegia pietatis* emerged quickly. Like Wesley's societies more than half a century later, the *collegia* were seen as a threat to the institutional church in terms of both the increasing role given to laity and also in terms of their relative independence suggesting issues of power, prerogatives, and control.

⁶²Ibid., p. 15. Brown, however, sees the creation of the *collegia* simply as an "extension of the values derived from his [Spener's] catechetical activities." Cf. Dale W Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978). p. 61.

⁶³K. James Stein, *Philip Jakob Spener* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1986), p. 87; and Albrecht Ritschl, *Geschichte des Pietismus*, 3 vols. (Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1880), 2:135.

⁶⁴Wilda Morris, "Philipp Jakob Spener: Continuing the Reformation," *The*

Spener, however, tried to address this last charge, and by 1675 he desired a change in the *collegium* from "a private matter created for Christian fellowship"⁶⁵ to "a churchly institution."⁶⁶ Like Wesley, Spener repudiated all notions of schism or separation from the mother church. In fact, as early as 1670, he so feared the specter of division that he declared to his people: "as long as God permits it to abide, even a corrupted ministry is an honorable office from which one may not separate."⁶⁷

In a similar fashion, the influence of Moravianism on the communal life of Methodism can be seen most readily in the use of bands--groups that were not only smaller than a Methodist class meeting but ones that were also far more focused in their call for serious discipleship. Such a focus was evident in both the rules for the band societies as well as the pointed questions that were asked of its members on a regular basis. Henderson maintains that the bands were part of an "affective mode,"⁶⁸ in which transformation of the tempers of the heart, at some of its deepest levels, was ever the goal. Not surprisingly, some of the Methodists chafed under the required searing examination and this structure of discipline eventually fell by the wayside in both British and American Methodism.

Impressed by the success of the Pietist *ecclesiola in ecclesia* model and the Moravian use of small, disciplined groups, Wesley developed the Methodist

Covenant Quarterly 38 (February 1980): 15.

⁶⁵Stein, *Spener*, p. 90.

⁶⁶*Ibid.* Snyder suggests three reasons why Spener's *collegia* were perceived as a threat: first, they elevated the role of the laity; second, they altered local church structure (*collegium presbyterorum*); and third, they tended to substitute the meeting for the confessional. Cf. Snyder, "Pietism," p. 71.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 92. Cf. Ritschl, "*Philipp Jakob Spener: Seine theologische und kirchliche Stellung*," in *Geschichte*, 2:97-124. And for the source of the pietistic pastoral ideal Cf. Martin Schmidt, *Der Pietismus Als Theologische Erscheinung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), p. 122ff. "*Das pietistische Pfarrerrideal und seine altkirchen Wurzeln.*"

⁶⁸D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, Indiana: Evangel Publishing House, 1997), p. 112.

infrastructure in terms its class meetings, bands, and select societies.⁶⁹ These cell groups became the practical expression of the priesthood of believers in that all members as well as the class leaders looked out for the spiritual welfare of each other. Discipline was exercised not only by such oversight, but also by restricting admittance to the love feasts which always required a ticket. "The soul and the body make a man;" Wesley quipped, the spirit and discipline make a Christian."⁷⁰ In fact, he attributed some of the decline of 18th century Anglicanism precisely to its lack of proper pastoral care and oversight: "In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now, whatever doctrine is preached, where there is not discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers."⁷¹ Even more pointedly, Wesley added: "preaching like an Apostle, without joining together those that are awakened, and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer."⁷²

The Methodist Infrastructure

Towards the end of 1739 eight or ten persons, who were deeply convinced of their sins, approached Wesley in London and desired that he would spend some time with them in prayer and advise them how they could "flee the wrath to come."⁷³ This was the rise of the United Society, first at London, and then in several other places. "Such a society," Wesley observed, "is no other than 'a company of men having the form, and seeking the power of godliness...'"⁷⁴

Now in order to determine whether the members of the **United Society** were

⁶⁹And though, as Snyder correctly points out, "Wesley did not ... explicitly draw on the Pietist *ecclesiola* model, he in fact viewed Methodism as an *ecclesiola*": that is, "his view of 'extraordinary ministers and gifts' seems to presuppose some kind of *ecclesiola* conception." Cf. Snyder, "Pietism, Moravianism and Methodism," p. 261.

⁷⁰Outler, *Sermons*, 4:90. (Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity).

⁷¹Ibid., 4:90. (Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity).

⁷²Ward and Heitzenrater, *Journals and Diaries*, 21:424.

⁷³Rupert E. Davies, *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., vol. 9: The Methodist Societies, I: History, Nature and Design (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 69. (A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists).

⁷⁴Ibid. (A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists).

indeed working out their own salvation, the society was divided into smaller companies called **classes** that were composed of about twelve persons, one of whom was the leader. And though the only requirement for entrance into the United Society was a "desire to flee the wrath to come," as just noted, to *remain* in a class aspirants had to evidence their desire for salvation by adhering to the General Rules of the United Societies in terms of the following: 1) avoiding evil 2) doing good, and 3) employing the means of grace. These same three rules, the first two of which form the basic precepts of natural law, emerged elsewhere in Wesley's writings, often in the context of repentance. This factor demonstrates that the very purpose of the class meeting was to foster repentance from an old way of life to a new one such that in time sins would be forsaken and the gracious tempers of holy love would arise in the community and in the hearts of its members.

The genius of the Methodist system, then, was evident at its inception in being open to all people, not simply Anglicans, and yet applying to them a discipline that would most likely inculcate real, true, proper Scriptural Christianity. In this way, open, willful sinners, those who refused to repent and to forsake their unholy ways, were not tolerated in the Methodist classes, lest the entire body be corrupted. "Evil men were detected and reproved," Wesley exclaimed, "they were borne with for a season. If they forsook their sins, we received them gladly; if they obstinately persisted therein, it was openly declared that they were not a part of us."⁷⁵ That such an exclusion was not done in a self-righteous way but with an eye on the good of the larger society is evident in Wesley's observation: "The rest mourned and prayed for them, and yet rejoiced, that, as far as in us lay, the scandal was rolled away from the society."⁷⁶ Unfortunately, these "Pietist" structures of discipline in the form of class meetings that had served eighteenth-century British

⁷⁵Davies, *The Methodist Societies*, 9:261. (A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists).

⁷⁶Ibid. And later in his career Wesley pointed out: "I cannot allow John Sellars to be any longer a leader; but if he will lead the class, whether I will or no, I require you to put him out of the Society. If twenty of his class will leave the Society too, they must. The first loss is the best. Better forty members should be lost than our discipline lost. They are no Methodists that will bear no restraints. Explain this at large to the Society." Cf. Telford, *Letters*, 7:101.

Methodism so well are no longer available in either a British or an American setting.⁷⁷

The Methodist class system was also distinct in that it was in sharp contrast to the Anglican form of Church structure which "mirrored the class-conscious stratification of English society."⁷⁸ That is, "Even the pew layout in the sanctuary [of an Anglican church]," Henderson notes, "was established according to an unchanging social order."⁷⁹ And though Wesley, himself, was not especially known for his democratic ways in the broader sphere of politics, he saw to it that such matters as class, economic status, or education did not lead to preference in the classes, thereby eliminating much prejudice at its root. Instead, one could advance in a Methodist class and assume a leadership role on the basis of faithfulness and spiritual progress, elements that were open to all. For this reason, among others, the poor often felt welcomed.

Though it was impossible to be a part of the United Societies and not be a member of a class, one did not have to participate in a **band**, a group that with its more rigorous discipline remained voluntary. Moreover, the bands were distinguished from the Methodist classes in that they had no designated leaders as such. Since it was assumed at this level of spiritual experience that participants had at least some measure of the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, mutual accountability and care therefore provided what leadership and direction were deemed necessary. Nevertheless, Wesley himself did indeed offer some guidance in the form of the Directions given to the Band Societies, composed in 1744. And although these Directions contain the same three elements of avoiding evil, doing good, and employing the means of grace that surfaced in the General Rules of the United Societies, and therefore suggest elements of repentance,⁸⁰ their content is somewhat different simply because they presume significant growth in grace. For example, the flagrant sins of "fighting," "drunkenness" and "taking the name

⁷⁷For more on how Wesley "pruned" the class meetings, Cf. Charles E. White, "John Wesley's Use of Church Discipline," *Methodist History* 29 (1991): 112-118.

⁷⁸Henderson, *Class Meeting*, p. 47.

⁷⁹Ibid. Bracketed material is mine.

⁸⁰In this context, such directions likely refer to evangelical not legal repentance. In other words, those in the bands were likely repenting of the carnal nature itself.

of God in vain," of the General Rules are not even mentioned in the Directions given to the Band Societies since its members, to use Wesley's own words, "are supposed to have the faith that overcometh the world."⁸¹ And although the classes and bands met separately, they were united at least once a quarter for the **love feast**, yet another Moravian contribution.⁸²

For those distinct members who "now outran the greater part of their brethren, continually walking in the light of God,"⁸³ Wesley organized them into a **select society**. For one thing, Wesley desired a group of earnest and mature Christians to whom he "might unbosom [himself] on all occasions,"⁸⁴ and one that he could also offer as an example to others as a pattern of love, holiness and good works. Because many of these members were on the threshold of Christian perfection, and were an example to both the classes and bands, Wesley maintained that they need not be encumbered with many rules, nor did they have any stated leader. Instead, Wesley simply offered a few directions which included a) confidentiality ("Let nothing in this society be spoken again"⁸⁵) b) obedience ("Every member agrees to submit to his Minister in all indifferent things"⁸⁶),

⁸¹Davies, *Societies*, 9:79. (Directions given to the Band Societies).

⁸²Snyder, "Pietism, Moravianism and Methodism," p. 145. For an important and helpful treatment of the place of the love feast in the liturgical practices of British Methodism Cf. Frank Baker, *Methodism and the Love Feast* (London, England: Epworth, 1957). For a consideration of the American practice, Cf. Richard O. Johnson, "The Development of the Love Feast in Early American Methodism," *Methodist History* 19, no. 2 (January 1981): 67-83.; and Lester Ruth, "A Little Heaven Below: The Love Feast and Lord's Supper in Early American Methodism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 59-79.

⁸³Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 8:260. (A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist).

⁸⁴Ibid. (A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist). Bracketed material is mine.

⁸⁵Ibid. 8:261. (A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist).

⁸⁶Ibid. (A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist). By means of this precept Wesley sought to inculcate the disposition of humility through the *practice* of obedience. This approach of spiritual guidance and care is similar to that of the *Rule of St. Benedict*. Cf. Anthony C. Meisel, and M. L. Del Mastro, *The Rule of St. Benedict*

and c) contributions ("Every member will bring, once a week, all he can spare toward a common stock.")⁸⁷ This highest level of the Methodist infrastructure, then, reveals that as grace increases so too does responsible liberty.

If classes, bands and select societies constituted the entirety of the structure of Methodism in eighteenth century Britain, it would have been far less likely that the movement would have clashed as it did with the Anglican church. But Wesley went beyond his Pietist and Moravian colleagues in his extensive use of **lay preachers**, often referred to as "**Helpers**," as well as a number of "**Assistants**" who aided in the superintending of these preachers. Wesley justified the employment of such preachers by making a distinction between an "ordinary" call and an "extraordinary" one, as noted earlier. In fact, in a letter to Mrs. Crosby in 1771 Wesley considered the "whole work of God termed Methodism [to be] an extraordinary dispensation of his providence."⁸⁸ The Church of England, however, did not see the matter quite this way, and several priests, and even a few bishops, repeatedly criticized the lay preachers for their lack of education and for their habit of violating parish boundaries. In 1744, Wesley organized these preachers into a **Conference**,⁸⁹ and later on he took care with respect to what was preached in a Methodist pulpit by promulgating the **Deed of Declaration** that stipulated "persons preach no other doctrine than is contained in Mr. Wesley's 'Notes upon the New Testament,' and four volumes of 'Sermons.'"⁹⁰

Drawing from both Pietist and Moravian models, what Methodism quickly became, to use the words of Outler, was "an evangelical order within *ecclesia*

(New York: Doubleday, 1975).

⁸⁷Ibid. (A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist).

⁸⁸Ibid., 12:356. (Letter to Mrs. Crosby, June 13, 1771). Bracketed material is mine.

⁸⁹Though at the first Methodist Conference in 1744 Wesley and others met with all the preachers; later on they reduced this participation to a select number. Cf. Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 13:255. (On Separation from the Church).

⁹⁰Ibid., 8:331. (Minutes of Several Conversations).

Anglicana."⁹¹ In other words, Methodism was never intended to be a church, with the "full panoply of bell, book and candle,"⁹² but a society, a *reforming order* within the larger communion of faith. "A society acknowledges the truths proclaimed by the universal church," Davies writes, "but claims to cultivate by means of sacrament and fellowship, the type of inward holiness...of which the church constantly needs to be reminded."⁹³ As such Methodism required an environment of "catholicity" in which to function, an environment that was integral to its identity as Wesley had understood so well. Indeed, apart from its mission and rather functional understanding of the church, Methodism would likely lose its identity and purpose. And this is one of the reasons why Wesley was so strongly opposed to separation from the Church of England. "But whenever the Methodists leave the Church," he warned, "God will leave them;"⁹⁴ they will have the form of religion but lack the power thereof.

In tying the issue of separation from the mother church to the cause of keeping Methodism vital, infused by the Spirit of God, Wesley in some sense linked ecclesiology to soteriology. And whether Wesley faced the Anglican church or that of Rome for that matter, he seemed to presume that the "catholic," traditional and institutional church, though it prided itself on its correct doctrinal judgments throughout history, and took comfort in its polity, church discipline and means of grace, nevertheless needed an evangelical order within it in order to maintain the power of religion or what Wesley had so often called real, true, proper Scriptural Christianity. Again, in Wesley's estimation, the broader church was constantly in need of reform and therefore ever required an transforming, prophetic order within it, lest the formal "objective" elements

⁹¹Albert C. Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?" in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1991), p. 223-24.

⁹²Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine?," p. 224.

⁹³Davies, *Societies*, 9:3. (Introduction).

⁹⁴Outler, *Sermons*, 3:589. (On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel). See also: A. H. Harrison, *The Separation of Methodism from the Church of England* (London: The Epworth Press, 1945); and N. S. Richardson, "John Wesley on Separation from the Church," *American Quarterly Church Review* 14 (1861): 63-74.

of the tradition, necessary to communicate the faith to subsequent generations, edge out a due consideration of the "enthusiastic" "supernatural" and "subjective" elements entailed in the healing Presence of the Holy Spirit in all of the Spirit's decisive redemptive power. This is a dynamic, charismatic understanding of the church and one in which reform is ongoing. For as Methodism needed the Anglican church as its context so too did Anglicanism need the Methodist society for its witness.

Service Through Works of Mercy

The body of Christ as a living organism must be energetic, engaged in all manner of good works, in order to thrive and to be a blessing to others. The church, for the sake of others, must, therefore, be "outward bound." Part of the genius of Methodism was that it had an extensive infrastructure in place, at least in the eighteenth century, by which the community could be galvanized for vigorous action not only in terms of works of piety but works of mercy as well. Put another way, the Methodist classes laced throughout the British Isles became the engine of service to the poor through the work of stewards and others. Consequently, in addition to works of piety (such as praying, reading the Bible, receiving the Lord's Supper) as contained in the instituted means of grace, Wesley repeatedly affirmed the value of works of mercy as a genuine means of grace whereby not only would the poor be helped to a better life but also those who minister to them would benefit in so many ways. Simply put, works of mercy, whether to the bodies or souls of those in need, include such things as "feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, or variously afflicted; such as the endeavoring to instruct the ignorant, to awaken the stupid sinner."⁹⁵

Interestingly enough, in a comparison of the value of works of piety and works of mercy, Wesley actually prefers the latter: "But they should be more zealous for 'works of mercy' than even for works of piety."⁹⁶ Beyond this comparison Wesley reveals his ever present goal in Christian discipleship in the following pointed observation: "Yet ought they to be more zealous still for holy tempers—lowliness, meekness, resignation; but

⁹⁵Outler, *Sermons*, 2:166. (The Scripture Way of Salvation).

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 3:318-19. (On Zeal).

most zealous of all for that which is the sum and the perfection of religion—the love of God and man."⁹⁷ Put another way, by means of works of mercy believers not only "exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace,"⁹⁸ but they also grow in the love of God and neighbor. Works of mercy, then, in a way similar to works of piety are genuine channels of God's grace not only to those who are served but also to those who minister to them. This soteriological circle of ministry suggests a dynamic relation of care whereby changes in the tempers of the heart, the implanting and fostering of holy love, may be the consequence of such simple helps and quite ordinary activities. The Kingdom of God, then, often emerges in the context of the mundane, and among the very least of all.

To serve the needy among the Methodists Wesley utilized the structure of the class meetings as appropriate vehicles to distribute such goods as food, clothing, and fuel. Especially concerned about the lack of sound medical treatment in England at the time, Wesley took it upon himself to attend medical lectures, to secure the advice of a pharmacist and physician, and to offer simple medical treatments to the indigent.⁹⁹ Moreover, in order to meet the pressing needs of those who were nearly penniless, Wesley created a free medical dispensary, the first of its kind in London,¹⁰⁰ and gathered together what medical knowledge he was able in the odd, though well-intentioned, manual *Primitive Physic*.

Beyond these ministries, which were motivated by nothing less than Christian love and compassion, Wesley employed women who were nearly destitute in the processing of cotton at the Foundery, and he also established a lending stock, for those short on funds, as early as 1746. In the beginning, this loan fund had hardly amounted to more than thirty pounds, but it soon grew to such an extent that about "two hundred and fifty

⁹⁷Ibid. (On Zeal)

⁹⁸Ibid., 3:313. (On Zeal).

⁹⁹Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 28.

¹⁰⁰Ward and Heitzenrater, *Journals and Diaries*, 20:151, note # 6.

persons were relieved in one year.”¹⁰¹ Among other things, Wesley’s charitable practices included collecting (or “begging”) money from some of his “rich” friends and then lending it to the underprivileged in lots of twenty shillings—a sum that was then repaid within three months on a weekly basis.¹⁰² Considering these rules of repayment, together with the structure of the Methodist class meetings, through which much of this aid was distributed, one can easily discern the accountable and responsible nature of much of Wesley’s ministerial practice.

In the area of politics, where works of mercy were also undertaken, Wesley was somewhat more hesitant and he remarked late in his career, "I am no politician; politics lie quite out of my province."¹⁰³ For one thing, Wesley thought that the political speech of the day was often not worth very much, if judged by careful reasoning, for "every cobbler, tinker, porter and hackney-coachmen,"¹⁰⁴ had a whole variety of political opinions that they often expressed freely to all within earshot. But did they have political knowledge? was a question that, if posed, could cut to the heart of the matter. Demonstrating a measure of humility, Wesley for his part admitted that he was not so learned as many of these malcontents; for "while they are sure of everything, I am in a manner sure of nothing."¹⁰⁵ And he cautioned his own preachers against "preaching politics" in the pulpit unless, of course, it entailed refuting the vile aspersions cast against the king. "Our main and constant business," Wesley warned his preachers, "[is] to 'preach Jesus Christ, and him crucified.'"¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹Ibid. 20:125.

¹⁰²Ibid. 20:204.

¹⁰³Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 11:14. (Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs).

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 11:15. (Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs).

¹⁰⁵Ibid. (Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs).

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 11:155. (How Far it is the Duty of a Christian Minister to Preach Politics?). Weber maintains that Wesley's position on political responsibility and authority was "an aberration from his evangelical theology." That is, Wesley's conception of God in terms of politics was different from that operative in the *ordo salutis*. Cf. Theodore R. Weber, *Politics and the Order of Salvation: Transforming*

Despite Wesley's misgivings in this area, he did after all express several political judgments in a number of treatises both in terms of the government in Britain and in America as well. Preferring the constitutional monarchy established in England in 1688 when William of Orange and his wife, Mary Stuart, were invited to the throne, Wesley was critical of the political thought of John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau especially when it suggested that the people were the origin of power. For Wesley, on the other hand, God was and must be seen as the origin of power and he, therefore, lampooned the reasoning of those political tracts that argued otherwise. For though some "democratic" pamphlets claimed that the people were the source of power, Wesley thought this claim was either an exercise in muddled thinking or outright hypocrisy since women, young adults, and those who did not hold a sufficient amount of land were outright excluded from political power—in other words more than half the populace! Beyond this, Wesley bolstered his critique of this political reasoning by an appeal to natural law which in his estimation was a reflection not only of the moral law, the fitness of relations established at creation, but also of the *imago dei* in which humanity was created. Consequently, "If it be said, 'O, women and striplings have not wisdom enough to choose their own Governors;' Wesley writes, "I answer, Whether they have or no, both the one and the other have all the rights which are 'inseparable from human nature.'"¹⁰⁷

Wesley's appeals to natural law in order to undertake works of mercy on behalf of his neighbor were far more detailed as he argued against the vile practice of slavery. Those who profited from this social institution justified their actions by noting that the positive laws of the nation were on their side. In other words, their actions, despite much criticism, were in fact *legal*. Wesley judged such reasoning to be faulty since it never considered whether enslaving another human being was *moral* or not. In his "Thoughts Upon Slavery," produced in 1774, Wesley replies: "But can law, human law, change the nature of things? Can it turn darkness into light, or evil into good? By no means.

Wesleyan Political Ethics (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), p. 411.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 11:99. (Observations on Liberty).

Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still."¹⁰⁸

Yet another way that Wesley approached the whole matter of slavery and natural law was to champion both civil liberty that entailed the freedom to "dispose of our lives, persons, and fortunes, according to our own choice and the laws of our country,"¹⁰⁹ and religious liberty that included the freedom "to choose our own religion; to worship God according to our own conscience."¹¹⁰ What grounded liberty in each instance for Wesley, and what could overturn slavery, was once again natural law, that is, rendering to all human beings what pertains to them as having been created in nothing less than the image and likeness of God. "Liberty is the right of every human *creature*, as soon as he breathes the vital air," Wesley notes, "and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature."¹¹¹ In this context, then, the law of nature is a reflection of the moral law that expresses the "nature and fitness of things" established at creation.¹¹² Therefore, slavery is not only a sin against humanity but also one against God, the Creator.

To undertake works of mercy on behalf of his neighbors who though in chains were "purpled over with the blood of Christ,"¹¹³ Wesley, shortly before his death, wrote to William Wilberforce, who was a member of Parliament at the time, and urged him to continue his reforming, abolitionist efforts: "O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it."¹¹⁴ A few years earlier, Wesley had

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 11:70. (Thoughts Upon Slavery).

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 11:92. (Observations on Liberty).

¹¹⁰Ibid. (Observations on Liberty). For a discussion of freedom of conscience as a human right, informed by theological considerations, Cf. Leon O. Hynson, "John Wesley's Concept of Liberty of Conscience," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 36-46.

¹¹¹Ibid. 11:79. (Thoughts Upon Slavery). Emphasis is mine.

¹¹²Outler, *Sermons*, 2:13. (The Original, Nature, Properties and Uses of the Law).

¹¹³Ibid., 3:425. (On Pleasing All Men).

¹¹⁴Telford, *Letters*, 8:265. (To William Wilberforce, February 24, 1791).

corresponded with Granville Sharp, who had founded a society for the abolition of slavery in 1787, and noted that "ever since I heard of it...I felt a perfect detestation of the horrid slave trade, but more particularly since I had the pleasure of reading what you have published upon the subject."¹¹⁵ Beyond this, a month later in November, 1787 Wesley revealed similar sentiments to Thomas Funnell: "Whatever assistance I can give those generous men who join to oppose that execrable trade I certainly shall give. I have printed a large edition on the *Thoughts on Slavery*.¹¹⁶

Clearly, then, in Wesley's eyes, the ongoing practice of slavery was nothing less than a scandal, "not only to Christianity but [to] humanity [as well]."¹¹⁷ It was not an institution that fostered either justice or proper relations between people. Instead, it raised profit and self-interest in an idolatrous way above everything else only to obscure the vision of the coming kingdom where divine grace and love would reign supreme. Speaking and writing against this evil practice, undertaking a significant work of mercy on behalf of those who were persecuted and without voice, was one of the many ways that Wesley and the people called Methodists sought to love both God and neighbor.

Conclusion

As in much of his practical theology, Wesley's doctrine of the church was dynamic, not static, and it held two crucial movements in tension. On the one hand Wesley understood the church, and Methodism as an important expression of it, as a community that has been called out from the world to be distinct and, in a real sense, a peculiar people, marked by the uncanny graces of the Most High. On the other hand, the

¹¹⁵Ibid., 8:17. (To Granville Sharp, October 11, 1787). Leon O. Hynson explores Wesley's reflections on slavery, once again, in terms of human rights in his "Wesley's 'Thoughts Upon Slavery': A Declaration of Human Rights," *Methodist History* 33, no. 1 (October 1994): 46-57. See also Irv A. Brendlinger, "A Study of the Views of Major Eighteenth Century Evangelicals on Slavery and Race, with Special Reference to John Wesley" (Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1982).

¹¹⁶Ibid., 8:23. (To Thomas Funnell, November 24, 1787).

¹¹⁷Ibid., 8:207. (To Henry Moore, March 14, 1790). Hynson explores Wesley's views on slavery in their proper context, that is, in terms of natural law and human rights. Cf. Leon O. Hynson, "Wesley's 'Thoughts Upon Slavery': A Declaration of Human

church, precisely as a community of love, must go outside of itself, beyond itself in transcending love and thereby be manifested in humble, sacrificial service. In other words, the church, as with Methodism, must by means of its labors embrace the "other" and seek communion. These two movements, then, the inhaling and exhaling of inward and outward expressions is the very respiration of the Body of Christ, and it can be aptly displayed in the phrase that Wesley himself employed, namely, "holy love." Therefore, Methodism's identity rooted in Scriptural holiness, the proper Christian faith, must be manifested in loving mission. Put another way, effective and vital ministry is tied into the sophisticated, "conjunctive" identity of Methodism itself: that is, neither holiness apart from love, nor love apart from holiness.

To be sure, if historic Methodism simply remained set apart, a holy people, then ministry to the world would have been cut off, and with it, Methodism's very purpose, identity, and mission. If, on the other hand, Methodism engaged the world, without first of all recognizing and being rooted in her own story, then such service would not have been marked by holiness nor would the richness of this revitalizing movement have been communicated. Worse yet, Methodism so defined would have run the risk of getting off its own story by taking on a narrative, a script, that was not its own. In his own day, Wesley held this careful tension in place, a tension that revealed reformation is ongoing, *semper reformanda*, simply because *the danger of acculturation and re-scripting* is ever present. Thus, it is only when Methodism reclaims her own story and purpose, rooted in a vital tradition, holding together both holiness and love, that she then will be empowered to minister to a hurting world in a way that will be transformative. And in the end such a transformation will be an invitation to nothing less than communion with God, for the story offered to the world is not a different narrative by which the church herself lives.

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