

Being Happy in God: Implications for the Nature and Mission of the Church
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Introduction

The center of theological reflection in the Wesleyan tradition has long been the way of salvation. This paper will explore how one aspect of the way of salvation, namely the idea that the end of human nature is happiness and holiness, might give direction to the activity and self-understanding of the church. I will not attempt a full ecclesiology in this paper, and I am mindful that any doctrine of the Church must consider not only our distinctive Wesleyan heritage, but also our place in the Church universal. My purpose is only to imagine some of the implications of this central theological insight of the Wesleyan tradition about the end of human nature for ecclesial understanding. While one cannot derive a complete understanding of the nature and mission of the Church from the end of human nature, it would certainly be foolish to ignore it.

In this project, I will focus on only one half of the description of the end of human nature, namely, happiness. Methodists have a long history of stressing “holiness,” but do not have such a history stressing “happiness.” Although “happiness” is a conceptual category with a long pedigree in religious and philosophical thought, it has not received the attention that it deserves in our tradition. I think the time has come to consider the potential of exploring “happiness” for two reasons. First, happiness is a useful point of entry for thinking about the way of salvation for many people. Many other crucial concepts have little meaning unless one has already been fairly well formed to understand their function and importance. The words “justification” and “sanctification” are not always common vocabulary and have to be explained, and words like “perfection” and

“holiness” have connotations that are negative and have to be overcome in order to get people to think they are worthwhile qualities to seek. As it will become clear later in this paper, happiness also has to be explained, but it is at least a starting point that people can usually see as relevant.

Second, happiness provides a significant way to engage the wider culture of our time. Psychology has begun to study, not only pathology, but happiness, and the results of this study are appearing in popular publications such as *TIME*, *Psychology Today*, and even *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Psychologists are making their research available through books written for the public, such as *Stumbling on Happiness*, by Daniel Gilbert, and *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, by Jonathan Haidt. Darrin McMahon’s *A History of Happiness* was named one of the 100 most notable books of 2005 by the *New York Times*. If the pursuit of happiness is at the forefront of 21st century thinking, then the Church needs to have a voice in defining the goal and to play a role in how that goal is pursued. Church bodies in the Wesleyan tradition have a particular advantage in this enterprise because Wesley gave explicit attention to that topic in his theology.

Happiness in Wesley’s Theology

More than seventy of John Wesley’s sermons include some reference to happiness, and some are devoted to the subject. Happiness was a common topic for learned discourse in the 18th century, so in identifying it (along with holiness) as the goal for human life, Wesley was a man of his time.¹ For him, though, the pursuit of happiness

¹ Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and others included happiness as a topic in their writings.

was, not simply a human quest, but the very heart of the story of salvation. It was the purpose that God intended for us in our creation, that was made unattainable in the fall, and that was restored as a possibility for us through Jesus Christ. The full and proper functioning of the faculties that mark us in the image of God leads to enjoyment of life, but the loss of the proper functioning of those faculties leads to misery. Knowing the love of God through Jesus Christ so that we are restored to God's image brings us "the happiness for which we were made."²

"True" or "real" or "genuine" religion aims at this happiness. Wesley understood salvation to be taking place in the present, and not only in the future, so the effects of salvation may be experienced in this life.³ Nominal Christianity can never deliver true happiness; but all the elements of real Christianity do so:

We are happy, first, in the consciousness of his favour, which indeed is better than the life itself; next, in the constant communion with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ; then in all the heavenly tempers which he hath wrought in us by his Spirit; again, in the testimony of his Spirit that all our works please him; and, lastly, in the testimony of our own spirit that 'in simplicity and godly sincerity we have had our conversation in the world.' Standing fast in this liberty from sin and sorrow, wherewith Christ hath made them free, real Christians 'rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks'. And their happiness still increases as they 'grow up into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'.⁴

Being regarded as righteous (justification) and being made righteous (sanctification) are both included in the description above, and they both lead to happiness. Holiness and happiness, then, are intimately connected. The grace which beckons us to relationship,

² "The Image of God" (1730) presents the way Wesley understood happiness before the fall and the misery that resulted from the fall. "The Unity of the Divine Being" (1789) talks about "the happiness for which we were made." These two sermons, written almost sixty years apart, show how consistently Wesley held this view that happiness is the end of our nature.

³ "The Scripture Way of Salvation," §I.1. In this paragraph of his sermon, Wesley calls our future salvation "eternal happiness." Present salvation can also be understood as happiness, but it is not yet eternal.

⁴ "The Unity of the Divine Being," §17.

which justifies us so that we may be called righteous, and which sanctifies us by enabling and empowering us to live as God wants us to live is the work of God to lead us to the happiness that will truly fulfill us. The way of salvation, then, is really a way of happiness.

Happiness, though, is a word that needed clarification in Wesley's time as it does in ours. Since 18th century literature was filled with language about happiness, some common usage was developing. Happiness was usually defined in terms of pleasure and pain, that is, things that gave pleasure made one happy and things that gave pain made one unhappy. Happiness and misery, then, were commonly opposed to one another as fundamental alternatives in human life.⁵ They also were seen to provide fundamental motivation for human life, that is, we seek the things that give us happiness and we avoid the things that bring us misery. Much of the literature of the time considered the mystery of what would bring true, lasting happiness so that it could be sought above all else.

Wesley adopted this basic scheme to some extent, but he understood pleasure and pain, happiness and misery, in terms of God. Christian theology had long used the language of desire to describe the pull of sin on us. Wesley made use of this theological idea within the framework of happiness and misery of his time. He frequently described sin in terms of three desires.⁶ First, there is the desire of the pleasures of the senses, such as food, sex, or comfort. Second, there is desire "of the eye" or "of the imagination," which seeks gratification in things that are grand or beautiful or novel, such as traveling

⁵ In the 17th century, John Locke actually built his epistemology up from sense experiences of pleasure and pain. These experiences provide us with distinct ideas that become the basis for establishing ideas that are less directly related to sense experience. Happiness (the experience of pleasure) and misery (the experience of pain) become fundamental options, even in mental life. These categories become organizing principles for much intellectual work in the 18th century.

⁶ In "Spiritual Idolatry," Wesley calls each of these desires idolatry, and he names them as such because we are "seeking happiness in the gratification" of the senses, the imagination, or praise. See §I.5, I.7, and I.15. The contrast to these false forms of happiness is found in "Spiritual Worship."

to impressive places or acquiring appealing objects or following the latest fashion.

Finally, there is the desire of praise, which Wesley often calls the “pride of life,” where status, the esteem of others, and “fear of dispraise” drive one’s thoughts and actions. We desire all these things because they give us pleasure, and we think the pleasure they give will bring us happiness.⁷ In thinking this, we are mistaken. Only God can give us the secure happiness that we seek. Our desires for these things, then, are misdirected. One basic problem that needs to be overcome in salvation is to redirect our desire toward God so that we will seek that which can truly fulfill us and therefore make us happy.

As Wesley talks about happiness, he needs to distinguish what he means from the kind of happiness that most people seek through these things that they desire. It is not, he says, the same as being “merry.”⁸

A glutton, a drunkard, a gamester may be 'merry'; but he cannot be happy. The beau, the belle, may eat and drink, and rise up to play; but still they feel they are not happy. Men or women may adorn their own dear persons with all the colours of the rainbow. They may dance and sing, and hurry to and fro, and flutter hither and thither. They may roll up and down in their splendid carriages and talk insipidly to each other. They may hasten from one diversion to another; but happiness is not there.⁹

The happiness that God provides is quite different. It consists of the peace that only God can give, which banishes doubt, uncertainty, and fear, and brings joy. Wesley describes this joy as calm, humble, and solid.¹⁰ True happiness is a possibility only when we desire

⁷ Wesley frequently preaches against the danger of riches because having money makes it easy to gratify these desires and thus think that one has gained happiness through one’s own means. The rich, though, are not the only ones who have these desires and try to gratify them. People with less money (even very little) can still spend it on drinking, gluttony, seeking novelty and diversion, and trying to win favorable attention from others. The problem of misdirected desire is basic to all human beings, cutting across class, gender, and economic situation.

⁸ In our time, it is common to hear Christians distinguish between “happiness” and “joy,” the former being superficial and temporary and the latter being what is true and secure. Wesley is working with the same kind of distinction, but with different language. The fact that “happy” holds a different place in these two categorizations is something that has to be explained if we are to make good use of his theology.

⁹ “Spiritual Worship,” §III.5

¹⁰ “The Way to the Kingdom,” §I.10-11.

God above all else. And its opposite is true misery, no matter how merry we may be, because we will not have gained that for which we were made.

The kind of happiness that Wesley has in mind is deeper than what we usually refer to as “feeling” or “emotion.” Indeed, one of the things that Wesley had to deal with in his time (as we do in ours) is how to account for people of faith who do not “feel” good. Although he does not provide a sustained analysis of this problem, he does acknowledge “exceptions.” People who suffer from “nervous disorders” or find themselves in “violent temptation” may not be able to experience the kind of calm and peace that Wesley describes.¹¹ As he talked about the situations that challenged happiness, Wesley had to distinguish between “darkness” and “heaviness,” the former indicating an actual loss of faith but the latter indicating the emotional state of a faithful person in a time of trouble.¹² Difficult circumstances (the loss of a loved one, calamity, poverty, acute or chronic illness) can lead to sorrow, but they do not threaten faith, peace, hope, love, or holiness—the basis for true happiness. Rather, one may “rejoice in sorrow” because of the confidence in God’s love and grace that are present through these circumstances. Indeed, God often uses these times to make us stronger, so they may be met with gratitude for and hope in the way that God can work through them for one’s sanctification. True happiness, in the sense that one is growing in holiness and therefore living in the moral image of God, is not threatened by these circumstances.

Another matter that Wesley had to explain was the relationship of happiness to pleasure. Although he warned against misdirected desire, Wesley did not completely deny taking pleasure in the things that God has provided to us to in creation. Pleasure

¹¹ “Spiritual Worship,” §III.6.

¹² Wesley writes about these two ideas in a pair of sermons “The Wilderness State” and “The Heaviness of Manifold Temptations.”

itself is not the problem. The problem lies in desiring things only for the pleasure that they bring because they provide a happiness that is false. When one's desire is rightly directed to God as the prime source and fulfillment of one's life, then pleasure in God's creation falls in its proper place. In response to the query about whether one could in fact prefer food that is pleasing to the senses rather than things that are not pleasing, Wesley said:

The difference between these and others in taking pleasant food is—1) They need none of these things to make them happy; for they have a spring of happiness within. They see and love God. Hence they rejoice evermore, and in everything give thanks. 2) They may use them, but they do not seek them. 3) They use them sparingly, and not for the sake of the thing itself.¹³

The difference lies in what one desires to make one happy, and when one is secure in the happiness that God alone can provide, then one takes pleasure in things as God's gifts, not as ultimate ends.

One of the old uses of the word "happy" in English was the idea of being fit, suitable, and appropriate. A "happy thought" or "happy use of language" indicated something particularly suited to the occasion. This old use of the word may be helpful in thinking about what a theological understanding of happiness is about. A person feels internal satisfaction and contentment when she or he lives appropriately according to the way things are. A happy life for Christians, then, would be a life that "fits" with God's intentions. We need to understand what we were created to be in order to understand what kind of life will fulfill us. Because true happiness can be elusive, we also need to understand what has gone wrong in the human situation that makes it so hard for us to live as we should. A theological understanding of happiness, then, will focus on more

¹³ *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, (Beacon Hill edition, 1966), 58.

than feeling. It will describe the context for our lives as we understand it in Christian faith, so that we may direct our lives toward fitting attitudes, activities, and goals.

Happiness is an important, but neglected, category in Wesley's theology. His conception of it is rooted in ancient theological ideas, is shaped to some extent by his time, and is nuanced according to his observation of lived experiences. What would it be like for Methodists to take seriously this deeply theological understanding of happiness in our conception of the mission and nature of the Church?

The Mission of the Church

Early Methodists described their mission as spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land. What would it be like if the Church thought of its mission as spreading scriptural happiness throughout the land? This conception may not provide a complete articulation of the mission of the Church, but it might provide some guidance for how to think about and implement the other things that the mission of the Church needs to include. If indeed the Church were to make use of this way of thinking about mission, one important feature to highlight is that we are spreading *scriptural* happiness. I would like to contrast this notion with two alternatives, philosophical happiness and psychological happiness.

Philosophical happiness is shaped by the Greek idea of *eudaimonia*. This Greek word combines the prefix that means "good" or "well" (*eu-*) with the word for "spirit" or "divinity" (*daimon*). The origin of this word may have come from the idea in Greek religious life of being favored by a divinity. In other words, life runs smoothly for a person when some god or spirit is well disposed toward that person. Depending on an

external source for *eudaimonia*, though, left one vulnerable to unhappiness if one's fortunes were reversed. Greek philosophers began to seek something more secure, located internally rather than externally. They extended the concept so that it referred to an excellent life, a life that was both praiseworthy and rewarding for one who had learned to value the right things, although exactly what constituted an excellent life was debated.

The dominant philosophical tradition (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle) understood *eudaimonia* as living in accord with our nature. In their hands, *eudaimonia* was changed from “happiness” or “flourishing” that depended on a well-disposed spirit to “happiness” or “flourishing” that was under one's own control as one learned to value the right things and to cultivate character traits (virtues) that fulfill one's nature.¹⁴ As Christian theologians began to make use of Greek philosophy in reflection on Christian faith, this understanding underwent yet another transition. Theologians accepted the idea that we flourish when we live according to our nature, and for them, the chief good which fulfills our nature was God. As they developed this idea, they did not use the word *eudaimonia* or its cognates. Instead, they used language from scripture, *makarios*, which means both “happy” and “blessed.” Greek philosophers had avoided that word because the idea of blessing indicated that happiness was dependent on something outside oneself. But for Christian theologians, the fact that the outside source of happiness was God made it secure. They were not concerned, then, with questions of vulnerability that had plagued Greek philosophy. When theologians began writing in Latin, the word became *beatus* (sometimes contrasted with *felicitas*), again conveying both “happy” and “blessed.”

¹⁴ It is difficult to know how to render *eudaimonia* in English. A common translation of the word is “happiness,” but because the English word “happiness” is so often used for feelings of elation—which is not the goal of wisdom—some translators prefer “flourishing” or “well-being.” There is, though, also satisfaction in attaining wisdom that “happiness” conveys well.

Scriptural happiness, then, conveys the idea that the deepest needs of our nature are fulfilled by something outside of us, not under our control, but nevertheless utterly secure.

Psychological happiness is the subject of study for a new field called positive psychology, which has begun to examine when and how people feel levels of satisfaction with their lives that can be described as “happy.” These studies use different methods (chemical analysis of the brain, interviews, surveys), and they are new enough that no complete, coherent picture of happiness has yet emerged. They are, though, identifying important elements of a fulfilling life, for instance that the gratification that comes from being absorbed in a challenging task lasts longer than the satisfaction that comes from physical pleasure, and that the kind of relationships we have with other people contributes positively or negatively to our well-being. The unhappiest people seem to be those who are alone and have nothing that needs to be done.¹⁵ Although research is ongoing, positive psychology has already suggested a formula for happiness: $H=S+C+V$. In other words, happiness is the combination of the set point (or range) of happiness allowed by your genes, the conditions in which you live, and the voluntary activities that you do.¹⁶ People may not be able to change their genes, but they can maximize the other two factors to lead the happiest life that is possible for them.

As with any science, positive psychology is able to study only what it is able to measure. Much of the information psychologists have gained about happiness comes from subjects who report on their own state of mind in different situations. The focus of

¹⁵ David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Who Is Happy—and Why?* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992), 137.

¹⁶ Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 90-91.

much of the scientific work, then, is on the mood of individuals. In contrast, the ancients included in their understanding of happiness not only inner attitudes but also living a life that could be recognized even by other people as being excellent. For ancient Greeks and for Christian theologians, one's inner state could only be truly content when one's life matched up with the way things really are so that one was living the way one ought to live. They spent time, then, thinking, not only about mood, but about meaning.

Scriptural happiness is about much more than a state of mind; rather, it is concerned with the ultimate context for our lives that allows us to find the meaning we so deeply desire and need for a truly happy life.

Spreading scriptural happiness *throughout the land* is equally important for thinking about the mission of the Church. People want to be happy, and they do not always know what will make them so. Recognizing this deep need in human life helps the Church see how important it is to reach beyond its own membership to others. Offering Christ means offering something positive, allowing them to see the difference that Christ can make in their lives now. People who might otherwise resist the idea of “evangelism” might be helped to see the importance of reaching out if they see this connection. People who are already interested in evangelism can be helped to shape their message so that it has relevance for people who might not otherwise be interested in listening.

But spreading scriptural happiness throughout the land does not have to be about traditional evangelism. It may also be about participating in public dialogue concerning happiness that is already taking place and in which Christians need to speak. This aspect of mission may be especially important because positive psychology as a field has

recognized the need for meaning and has begun to move beyond scientific research about brain activity or self-reported mental states into questions about value and virtue that have in the past belonged to ethics, religion, philosophy, etc. It has done so surrounded by controversy and with mixed results, but it is getting a hearing in the public arena that will be shaping public understanding of happiness for some time to come.¹⁷

The Church needs to be seen also as a way of understanding happiness that is rich and powerful and that deserves to be heard. We can remind people who seek happiness to look beyond themselves to the source and end of their lives, indeed the source and end of all creation. A Christian understanding of happiness draws us out of ourselves to see our connection to other creatures through God so that we are concerned with more than our personal satisfaction or personal meaning. If happiness is about salvation, and if salvation is about wholeness that God intends—not simply for individuals, but also for the world—then a Christian understanding of happiness challenges any version that falls short of this goal. Perhaps part of the mission of the Church is to spread this vision throughout the land, even if it does not lead to personal conversions to Christianity.

The Nature of the Church

The nature of the Church covers many areas that need careful consideration (the marks of the Church, the sacraments, orders of ministry, etc.), and we have less clear direction from our specifically Methodist heritage regarding the nature of the Church than we do regarding its mission. Furthermore, happiness may also supply less guidance on

¹⁷ D.T. Max reports on how positive psychology is being used in education and on the questions that are currently being debated about that practice. “Happiness 101,” in *New York Times*, January 7, 2007. Retrieved from online version on January 18, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/07/magazine/07happiness.t.html?ex=1169355600&en=9024a0623b60ae44&ei=5070>

this topic, although to the extent that ecclesiology and soteriology are related it should contribute something of importance. In this section, I want to limit exploration to two topics, namely the Church as the instrument of salvation and the Church as holy.

Cyprian gave to the Church the idea that it is the ark of salvation. In a raging storm, it is the only safe place. This understanding of the Church leads directly to an understanding of mission as getting people into the ark, that is, of making people Christians so that they may gain entrance into the Church as the place where salvation happens. More recently, some theologians have suggested a shift in thinking about how the Church is instrument of salvation. Rather than the place where salvation occurs, the Church is thought of as a sign of salvation, that which points to and manifests salvation.¹⁸ Different understandings of grace lie beneath these alternatives. In the former, grace is something that is not available in the world and the Church becomes the container for it and thus the place for receiving it. In the latter, grace is available in the world as well as the Church, and the Church is “instrument” of grace, not by containing it, but by making it apparent and therefore more effective. Methodist commitment to prevenient grace in the world suggests that the idea of Church as sign would fit Methodist theology better than the idea of Church as ark.

Recognizing the way of salvation as a way of happiness is also going to favor the image of sign over the image of ark. Concern about “salvation,” particularly of those who are not Christian, usually revolves around the question of what happens to people

¹⁸ The Catholic Church has begun developing this idea since Vatican II. Mary E. Hines writes about the shift in official documents, as well as for individual theologians. See “Community of Liberation,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) 161-184. Schubert M. Ogden also makes use of this shift in images for thinking about the doctrinal self-discipline of The United Methodist Church. See “Doctrinal Standards in The United Methodist Church,” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, ed. by Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1991), 39-51.

when they die. Thinking of the way of salvation as a way of happiness, though, forces us to consider the question about what happens to people now, that is, of salvation as a present thing. It makes even less sense to say “no happiness outside the Church” than it does to say “no salvation outside the Church.” To acknowledge that God’s power and presence is available in the world and not simply in the Church is to acknowledge that God is always and everywhere working to lead us toward God’s intent for human life. This recognition does not deny a special role for the Church in God’s universal gracious activity. Along with prevenient grace, Methodists have also acknowledged the breadth and depth of sin. God’s leading does not inevitably result in human following. The way of happiness requires attentive involvement—reflective and active, personal and social. The Church plays a crucial role in pointing constantly to our goal and in providing assistance to those who want to realize God’s intent for their lives. It is at this point that the connection between holiness and happiness becomes an important topic for thinking about the nature of the Church.

Even if the Church is not the exclusive place of salvation (the ark), it cannot function as sign to the world of salvation if it is not also in some significant way a place where salvation is occurring. Although it may mean more, calling the Church “holy” at least means that it shares in the holiness of God and that it enables people to participate in God’s holiness. In Wesleyan theology, holiness for a person is both a gift and a task. We are made righteous so that we may become righteous. Methodists have long seen that the Church needs to structure itself so that individuals can come together for mutual accountability as they move along the way of salvation. The small groups of the Methodist societies served this purpose well. Methodists have also seen the need for

constant use of the means of grace on this journey, and indeed one of the greatest pressures to become a Church was the need for Holy Communion. The Church, then, provides us with opportunities and means for learning to fit our lives to God's intentions for them. The things we do to become more holy are also the things we do to become more happy, in the "scriptural" sense. The Church enables us to participate more fully in the life that Jesus Christ has to offer, to form habits that we need to follow Jesus Christ on the way to happiness.

We know from our own history that the existence of the institutional Church does not guarantee that it will be an effective sign in this way. Methodist societies were needed precisely because the Church was not cultivating lives of holiness for many of its members. Furthermore, the emphasis in the Articles of Religion on the *due* administration of the sacraments and the *pure* preaching of the Word of God implies that the possibility of undue administration and impure preaching exists. The Church as a whole, then, as well as the individual members that constitute it, needs to discipline its life so that it may be a fitting vehicle for making God's grace manifest.¹⁹ It may be that for the Church, too, holiness is both gift and task. The Church, too, needs to fit its life into God's intentions in order to be the sign it is supposed to be for the world. It needs to be a "happy" sign in the sense that it is suitable for its work. If it is not aiding the holiness and happiness of the people who participate in it, then it cannot bear witness to the holiness and happiness that God has to offer to the world. In all the ways that the Church orders its life—its ministry, its sacraments, its preaching—it needs to consider what will promote holiness and happiness.

¹⁹ Ogden, 48-51.

If the nature of the Church is to be a sign of holiness and happiness, then we may add to what we have already said about its mission. Spreading scriptural happiness throughout the land also means bearing witness throughout the land to the work of God in human life so that God's intention may be realized more powerfully wherever God is at work. Nature and mission belong together; what the Church is and what it does determine each other. Both may be informed to some degree by the understanding of salvation that the Church is here to share, and for Methodists, that understanding should include the happiness for which we are made.

Conclusion

Reflecting on happiness can help the Church serve the present age and fulfill its calling. Although it is certainly a current topic, happiness is not simply "trendy." It has a long history in theology, and it has a significant place in our specifically Wesleyan heritage. We can use "happiness" to talk about what truly fulfills human desire, to distinguish genuine happiness from temporary feelings, and to show how personal meaning must be rooted in God in order to be secure. Scriptural happiness draws from ancient wisdom, and it gains nuance from John Wesley's keen observations of human struggles. If the Church considers how the end of human nature ought to inform its activity and self-understanding, then it can find motivation and direction for its mission.