

## **'PURSUE PEACE WITH EVERYONE AND THE HOLINESS WITHOUT WHICH NONE SHALL SEE THE LORD (HEB 12.14).' DO WESLEYANS READ SCRIPTURE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE BOOK OF HEBREWS?**

A generation ago, Dunn in his *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* noted that traditional Pentecostalism formed its theology of spirit baptism primarily in relation to the book of Acts, suggesting that for them Paul need not have written anything.<sup>1</sup> Dunn refers to this as finding a 'canon within the canon' and argued that for some within traditional Pentecostalism most of the New Testament is read through the lens of the events of Acts 2.

I contend that those who have some familiarity with the holiness movement within Methodism and its heirs recognise a similar pattern. However, within Wesleyan holiness tradition the 'canon within the canon' is shaped primarily by Hebrews, particularly its discussion of 'holiness without which none shall see the Lord' (12.14). It is through this lens that much of scripture has been, and in some quarters, continues to be read. Hynson argues, 'As Luther developed a hermeneutic of justification, the Holiness people developed a hermeneutic of holiness.'<sup>2</sup> It is my contention that this hermeneutic has been shaped very significantly by the book of Hebrews.

That holiness is a significant theme in the book of Hebrews can hardly be disputed. Hebrews has quite a lot to say on holiness, perfection, and sanctification. The book employs a range of terms in speaking about holiness. It speaks of perfection, (τελειῶν), of sanctifying (ἀγιάζων), holiness (ἀγιασμόν), holy (ὅσιος), and of purified (καθαριεῖ) conscience. Clearly, there is some overlap of meaning in these terms but a number of nuances emerge in the exploration of holiness in the text.

### **BELIEVERS ALREADY SANCTIFIED**

Perhaps one of the most striking of these is the conceptual framework of the writer which assumes the holiness of God and the holiness of his people as a given. Unlike in 1 Peter where the pursuit of holiness is urged (be holy as God is holy) here the holiness of God, of Christ, and of his people is assumed. Heb 10.10 asserts, 'it is by God's will that *we have been sanctified* through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.' 1.14 is equally strident: 'by a single offering *he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified,*' whilst 2.11 affirms that 'the one who sanctifies and *those who are sanctified* have one Father.'

Hebrews is consistent in its description of Christians as already sanctified in and through the definitive act of Christ. Perhaps such a viewpoint is unsurprising in light of the fact that the writer is clearly steeped in the traditions of the OT and the cult and assumes (rightly or wrongly) that his readers are equally conversant. Therefore, the writer assumes that since Christians are the people of God then by virtue of that fact they are the holy, i.e., *sanctified*, people of God.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. James D G Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (London: SCM, 1970),

<sup>2</sup> cf. Leo Hynson, 'The Wesleyan Quadrilateral In The American Holiness Tradition' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* Volume 20, Number 1, Spring, 1985, 20.

## JESUS AS SANCTIFIER

Interestingly, it is Jesus who is the sanctifier in Hebrews; by the will of God, certainly, but it is Jesus who is sanctifier, nonetheless (10.10). In the Hebrew Bible which provides the theological foundation blocks for the argument of the text it is Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, who is seen as sanctifier. Here it is Christ. Peterson observes that Hebrews talks of being sanctified by Christ as a finished work, i.e., the sanctification of Christians is complete. An awareness of this sanctification brings about conviction of conscience in believers which results in dedicated service to God.<sup>3</sup> Lane makes a similar observation: 'In Hebrews human endeavour is never the subject of sanctification. Christ alone is the one who consecrates others to God through his sacrificial death.'<sup>4</sup>

## ESCHATOLOGICAL IN CHARACTER

Holiness in Hebrews is thoroughly eschatological in character. It is perhaps one of the reasons that the writer is happy to use the language of perfection. In Peterson's view, perfection in Hebrews is not moral, nor is it a euphemism for sanctification, or cleansing from sin, but is a term pointing to the final fulfilment and consummation of relationship between God and humanity, i.e., it is eschatological perfection.<sup>5</sup> He states, 'Believers are perfected in the perfecting of Christ. ...their perfection is already accomplished by Christ.'<sup>6</sup> Though Peterson's sharp demarcation between perfection and sanctification is unconvincing since Hebrews does not make such clear and unambiguous distinctions but rather presents perfection as inclusive of both sanctification and cleansing from sin (cf. 1.14), he is, nonetheless, right to identify perfection in Hebrews as being located within the eschatological work of Christ. Lane has a similar viewpoint, arguing that in Hebrews holiness (ἁγιασμός) does not possess an ethical significance but is eschatological in character.<sup>7</sup>

This eschatological character is partly the reason Hebrews urges the pursuit of holiness. Bruce argues that holiness is 'the goal for which God is preparing his people – that entire sanctification which is consummated at their manifestation with Christ in glory.'<sup>8</sup> The pursuit of this sanctification, then, without which none shall see the Lord, is not an optional extra but essential to the life of a Christian.<sup>9</sup> Lane observes that the verb in 12.14 'pursue' (δίωκειν) is a stronger term than the more commonly used 'seek' (ζητεῖν)<sup>10</sup> and connotes the earnest pursuit of holiness and the urgency of the command. This urgent pursuit (δίωκειν) is especially necessary if holiness in Hebrews is understood to be the provision which alone allows access into the presence of God.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless we must heed Cockerill's uncommon though surely correct reminder that it is the pursuit of both peace and holiness which are prerequisite in order to see the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> cf. David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 38ff.

<sup>4</sup> William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 450.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Peterson (1982), 36ff for more on this view.

<sup>6</sup> Peterson (1982), 175.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Lane, 450.

<sup>8</sup> F F Bruce, *Commentary of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 344.

<sup>9</sup> cf. Bruce (1990), 348.

<sup>10</sup> cf. Lane 449.

<sup>11</sup> cf. Lane, 450.

<sup>12</sup> c.f. Gareth Lee Cockerill, *Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 633.

## NOW & NOT YET

Because holiness in Hebrews is eschatologically nuanced there is a 'now and not yet' tension in its discussion of holiness. This is why in Hebrews, despite the fact that the sanctification of believers is assumed, they are nonetheless urged to pursue holiness without which none shall see the Lord. Bockmuehl explains:

[Sanctification] is understood first as a saving event in the past in which believers were sanctified 'once and for all' .... Thus they can now regularly be addressed as *hagiasmenoi*, the sanctified... or as saints (*hagioi*). Sanctification is also seen as an ongoing and future work of God....<sup>13</sup>

Koester also notes this tension in Hebrews; the readers have already been made holy through Christ's sacrifice (9.14) but do not yet fully share in God's holiness (12.10).<sup>14</sup> This is the tension between the already and the not yet. This tension is crucial in all talk of holiness in Hebrews because of its eschatological location.

Koester expresses the tension in terms of looking backwards to what Christ has done and looking forwards to what God will do. He posits, 'In Hebrews pursuing holiness means trusting in what Christ's death has accomplished and maintaining hope for everlasting life with God.'<sup>15</sup> However, one is left wondering whether Koester understates what holiness is or means in Hebrews. Holiness certainly requires trust in what Christ has done and hope in what God will do but a careful reading of Hebrews reveals an understanding of holiness more rooted in objective reality than Koester seems to allow.

For example, Hebrews 10.10 declares that 'it is by God's will that we *have been sanctified* through the offering of the body of Jesus once for all.' In similar vein 10.14 declares: 'by a single offering he has perfected for all time those *who are sanctified*.' 2.11 speaks of the One who sanctifies and those *who are sanctified* all having the same Father. It seems clear that holiness in Hebrews involves an objective sharing in the holiness of the Sanctifier himself rather than merely trust in what Christ has done and hope in what God will do.

Thus the viewpoint of Lane who argues that holiness in Hebrews is the objective gift of Christ achieved through his sacrificial death on the cross<sup>16</sup> seems closer to the biblical witness. Attridge agrees, observing: 'For Hebrews the believer's share in divine sanctity derives from the act of the true High Priest.'<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, Koester's observation that holiness enables hope for everlasting life with God is surely at least partly in view when the text alludes to that holiness without which none shall see the Lord.

In passing, it is worth noting the observation of Barton that holiness is made possible, ironically and paradoxically, through the profanity and defilement of a corpse.<sup>18</sup> This irony would not have been lost on a writer thoroughly conversant with the cult and serves only to heighten the eschatological nuance of holiness.

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<sup>13</sup> K Bockmuehl, 'Sanctification.' *New Dictionary of Theology*, (Eds.) S B Ferguson, & D F Wright, (Leicester: IVP, 1987), 613.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Craig R Koester, *Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 539.

<sup>15</sup> Koester, 541.

<sup>16</sup> cf. Lane, 450.

<sup>17</sup> Harold Attridge, *Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 363.

<sup>18</sup> cf. Stephen C Barton, 'Dislocating and Relocating Holiness: A New Testament Study.' *Holiness Past & Present* (Ed.) Stephen C Barton, (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 206.

Holiness in Hebrews, then, is complex and diverse; a wide range of words and nuances are employed in its descriptions of holiness. Believers are already holy now and yet are to pursue holiness for holiness is both now and not yet; holiness is thoroughly eschatological and not merely ethical but, nonetheless, cannot be separated from ethics.

### ***Canon within a Canon?***

Thus far the paper has argued only what is largely self evident to the careful reader; that holiness is a significant theme in the book of Hebrews. But, what of its central question? How far does the Wesleyan holiness tradition read the NT through the lens of Hebrews, and particularly Hebrews 12.14? It is my contention that this is an observable phenomenon, and one which we can trace back to the founders of the movement, though this hermeneutic becomes more explicit among the 19<sup>th</sup> century heirs of Wesley.

However, it is important to note that the paper does not argue that Hebrews constitutes an essential plank in early Wesleyan descriptions of holiness. I suggest that it does not. Tyson argues that the Wesleys draw primarily upon texts from the epistles of John, James and Hebrews to express their understanding of holiness.<sup>19</sup> Tyson further observes, 'The theological language they employed was thoroughly biblical but was not based in Pauline Christianity.'<sup>20</sup>

However, it is of interest to note that none of John Wesley's published sermons selects Hebrews as its text. His sermons are primarily based upon the Gospels, and Pauline or Johannine Epistles. In those sermons which specifically address the question of holiness, for example, *Circumcision of the Heart*, *He who is Born of God Does not Sin*, or *On Christian Perfection*, Wesley declines to select texts from Hebrews either as his main text or supporting texts.

Moreover, in his most sustained treatment of the doctrine of holiness in print, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, John Wesley makes very limited reference to Hebrews. In his seminal book exegeting Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection Sangster calculates that Wesley quotes the bible 195 times in his *Plain Account* but argues that the weight of his arguments rest primarily on 30 texts: 10 from 1 John, 10 from Pauline Epistles and 10 from elsewhere in the Bible including one OT text in Ezekiel.<sup>21</sup> Only one of these 30 texts is from Hebrews but it is to Hebrews 6 rather than 12 that Wesley directs the readers' attention.

All of this might appear to undermine the argument that Hebrews 12.14 is a key text through which Wesleyan holiness tradition approaches the NT and the further assertion that this can be traced back to Wesley himself. However, I share the view eloquently expressed by Sangster. 'That none could see God without holiness was axiomatic with Wesley. Was it not plainly set down in Hebrews xii.14?'<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Sangster argues, 'This becomes clear the moment we ask the elementary question, "Why was he

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<sup>19</sup> John R Tyson, *Charles Wesley on Sanctification*, (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 164.

<sup>20</sup> Tyson, 163.

<sup>21</sup> W E Sangster, *The Path to Perfection*, (Epworth Press, 1943), 36.

<sup>22</sup> Sangster, 65.

[Wesley] so anxious to get people holy?" – the simple answer being that he wanted to get them to heaven.<sup>1 23</sup>

Hempton concurs: "If conversion started the Methodist pilgrimage, and the pursuit of entire sanctification moved it along, death was its consummation."<sup>24</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyan Methodist connexion described its plans for education in a similar vein:

What we wish for is not merely schools but *Church* schools; ... not merely education, but an education which may begin in an Infant School and end in heaven.<sup>25</sup>

Two hundred years after Wesley, similar sentiments about the priority of holiness may be found in popular print. However, they are not expressed as a distinctive Wesleyan viewpoint but rather as an orthodox one to which the whole church had given its assent from the earliest of times. For example, J Baines Atkinson confidently asserts, 'It is the universal testimony of the early church that we must be clothed in the beauty of holiness if we are to see the Lord.'<sup>26</sup>

In Wesley's own account of his developing conviction of both the veracity and importance of the doctrine of Christian Perfection, it is his reading of Jeremy Taylor's *Exercises for Holy Living and Dying* which launches him upon this journey. It is the focus on holy dying in particular which gives the pursuit of Christian perfection such impetus in the nascent evangelical movement.

Hempton observes that birth, life and death, or 'to Methodize' these natural processes, conversion, sanctification, and holy dying, were at the heart of Methodist spirituality.<sup>27</sup> He continues:

The approach of death, that twilight zone between life and eternity, was the final testing point of Methodist spirituality. To die a good and holy death, free from anguish and uncertainty, was the aspiration placed before the Methodist faithful in the pages of the *Arminian Magazine*, a periodical read by as many as a hundred thousand people by the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

The importance of a holy death is at least two fold. First, such a death demonstrates that the claims of holiness are valid; they hold true even in that most extreme circumstance of human experience, our mortality. Second, it is a guarantee that the faithful will see God. Hence the importance of Hebrews 12.14: 'Pursue holiness without which none shall see God. It is for this reason that:

The deathbed scenes of the Methodist faithful popularised through print were melodramatic, ritualistic, and paradigmatic. Above all they were meant to show to the immediate family, the wider Methodist community, and thousands of

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<sup>23</sup> Sangster, 65.

<sup>24</sup> David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Wesleyan Methodist Conference, *Report on Sunday and other Schools Presented to the Conference* (London: Wesleyan Book Room, 1837), 8.

<sup>26</sup> J Baines Atkinson, *The Beauty of Holiness*, (London: Epworth Press, 1953), 139.

<sup>27</sup> Hempton, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Hempton, 67.

readers that the faith of Methodists worked unto death itself. ....lives well spent in disciplined holiness were given the ultimate reward of triumphant glory.<sup>29</sup>

It is noteworthy how John Wesley's deathbed scene fits such a pattern, both in print and in artistic depiction. The deathbed final moments are portrayed as beatific. During his final hours, John Wesley followed what had become a Methodist tradition by singing the following words from a hymn by Isaac Watts:

I'll praise my maker while I have breath  
And when my voice is closed in death  
Praise shall employ my nobler powers<sup>30</sup>

The final spoken words attributed to John Wesley, 'Best of all, God is with us!' <sup>31</sup> and his widely reproduced deathbed scene depicted by Parker only furthers that impression that Wesley achieved that which he desired most of all, a holy death. Nor was this Wesley's aim alone. The only requirement for joining a Methodist Society was 'a desire to flee the wrath to come.'

There is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into these societies, — a desire "to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins:" But, wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation.<sup>32</sup>

Salvation itself was not understood to be complete until the consummation of the age to come. Christians are until the point of death, always in the process of being saved. Similarly, Christ's holy ones are always in the process of being sanctified and should demonstrate this process in their spiritual growth.

It may be argued then, that the aim of all Methodist work and ministry was this: to enable its adherents to flee the wrath to come by ensuring they pursue that holiness without which none shall see the Lord. On such a reading all Christian doctrine, all Christian ministry, and all readings of scripture are subsumed into an overarching metanarrative: the point of the exercise is the pursuit of holiness.

My argument, then, is that precisely such a hermeneutic of holiness, may be observed in some parts of the Wesleyan holiness tradition, which is shaped by a particular understanding of Hebrews 12.14. This hermeneutic does not add a great deal to our understanding of what holiness is or requires. Instead it legitimises the pursuit of holiness and in so doing exercises a profound influence upon Wesleyan understandings of holiness, perspectives on scripture, and the exercise of Christian.

Moreover, such a hermeneutic may be observed in Wesley himself. It is difficult to overestimate the great importance attached to the pursuit and preaching of holiness in Wesley's assessment of the ministry of the people called Methodists. In 1790, towards the end of his life, John Wesley declared, '...with regard to full sanctification... this

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<sup>29</sup> Hempton, 67.

<sup>30</sup> [www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/exhibitions/web/charleswesley/thesingingmethodists/](http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/exhibitions/web/charleswesley/thesingingmethodists/)  
John Rylands Library accessed 12 July 2013.

<sup>31</sup> REFERENCE NEEDED

<sup>32</sup> John Wesley, 'Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies'

doctrine is the grand *depositum* which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up.<sup>33</sup>

It is striking that the venerable John, by this time virtually the last of his generation, able to look back on a movement stretching back over 50 years which exceeded all expectations and accomplished a great deal of good, nonetheless concludes that the primary *raison d'être* of the movement is the propagation of the doctrine of holiness, or full sanctification. It is striking that he does not identify the preaching of the gospel, neither the alleviation of poverty, nor even the revival of the church as his understanding of their primary object. A hermeneutic of holiness at its simplest means that the whole of scripture and the whole of the exercise of Christian ministry are subjugated to this overarching ideal: the pursuit of holiness. The justification for this subjugation is held to be self-evident: without holiness none shall see the Lord.

## WHY DOES THIS HERMENEUTIC MATTER?

The significance of this hermeneutic is at least twofold. First, if it is true that at least part of the Wesleyan holiness tradition has read and continues to read the New Testament primarily by means of a hermeneutic of holiness viewed through the lens of Hebrews this constitutes one distinctively Wesleyan reading of scripture which may be put into dialogue with other readings of scripture, enriching the ongoing conversation. Further work needs to be done exploring the nuances of this hermeneutic and noting its particular contribution.

Second, and more importantly, it seems clear that the early days of the Methodist movement were manifestly shaped by a commitment to mission. If the people called Methodist ever were a discipleship movement shaped for mission this was most true in its earlier days, which coincides most closely with the time in the movement when a hermeneutic of holiness was most evident. The missional impulse is perhaps not a coincidence, but a consequence of this hermeneutic of holiness. Findlay observes:

In the second stage of the advance of Methodism, from the year 1760 onwards... the pursuit of holiness engrossed the minds of preachers and people throughout the societies. This internal work of the Holy Spirit had much to do with the forming of the missionary mind in early Methodism. ...The sanctifying of heart and will imparts the yielding of hands and tongue, talents and goods, an entire living sacrifice.<sup>34</sup>

With such an outlook, Methodist interest in holy dying takes on missional significance:

for those who had invested in, and sacrificed for, the Methodist message, a holy and peaceful death was not only an authentication of the way they spent their lives but was also a powerful and final evangelistic gesture.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> John Wesley, *The Letters of John Wesley Vol VIII*, Ed. John Telford, (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 238.

<sup>34</sup> G C Findlay & W W Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Vol I*, (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 33.

<sup>35</sup> Hemton, 67-8.

## ***Holiness as a Missional Imperative***

Holiness without which none shall see the Lord appears to have been a potent factor in the undertaking of mission among Methodist people in the past. Could it be again in the future? Might current approaches to mission among the heirs of Wesleyan tradition be rejuvenated if rooted in a hermeneutic of holiness?

For early Methodists experience of God's grace was nothing, if not transformative. However, in their view, such transformation occurred only within a triangular matrix of community, understanding and experience. At the risk of over-simplification, Methodist praxis was to place converts within a *community* seeking transformation, to offer teaching that they might *understand* this transformation, with the intention that they might *experience* this transformation.<sup>36</sup>

As argued above, early Methodists understood the ultimate goal of experience of God's grace to be Christian perfection. However, the primary Methodist arenas for transformation were Class & Band Meetings and Social Activism. That Class & Band Meetings were essential institutions of early Methodism, a primary arena for transformation, and crucial to any exploration of Methodist understanding of holiness is a claim which is hardly in need of defence. However, can the same be said of Methodist social activism? In a word, yes.

For the Wesleys, holiness was love of God expressed primarily through love for neighbour. Thus, Methodism from its very outset was focussed on the margins and on service to the poor, not simply because these are worthwhile undertakings in themselves but crucially because they were viewed as expressions of holy conduct, means of grace, and opportunities for transformation of both individuals and society. In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* Wesley argues:

One of the principal rules of religion is to lose no occasion of serving God. And, since he is invisible to our eyes, we are to serve him in our neighbour; which he receives as if done to himself in person, standing visibly before us.<sup>37</sup>

Wesley unpacks love of neighbour in another passage on Christian perfection:

And loving God, he 'loves his neighbour as himself;' he loves every man as his own soul. He loves his enemies, yea, and the enemies of God. And if it be not in his power to 'do good to them that hate' him, yet he ceases not to 'pray for them,' though they spurn his love...<sup>38</sup>

This understanding of holiness expressed through love for neighbour lay at the root of Methodist social activism which was as constitutive of Methodism as its Class and Band meetings. Far from being peripheral, social action was integral to Methodist pursuit and understanding of holiness. Exploring Class & Band Meetings and Methodist Social

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<sup>36</sup> This section is influenced by the work of Tom Albin on the structures of early Methodism and their purpose. I am grateful for a very helpful breakfast conversation with Tom at the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in the summer of 2007. For more on this cf. Thomas R Albin, '“Inwardly Persuaded”: Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism,' *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, Richard B Steele (Ed), London: Scarecrow, 2001, 33-66.

<sup>37</sup> John Wesley, 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,' 372.

<sup>38</sup> John Wesley, 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,' 304.



Action, then, may offer some insights into how a hermeneutic of holiness may have shaped an understanding of holiness as a missional imperative.

## CLASS & BAND MEETINGS

It was in the Bristol society in February 1742 that the Class Meetings began in response to a financial need. Very quickly, it became a weekly meeting rather than a leader visiting individual members and evolved to become the basic unit around which Methodism began to expand.<sup>39</sup> By 1745-6, Class Meetings of this sort had become the norm in Methodist Societies.

Methodist Band meetings have an earlier origin, dating back to 1738, and were the small group for those who had experienced justification. Most bands had four to eight members, usually at similar stages of Christian maturity, and there were separate bands for married women, married men, single women, and single men. Bands were not primarily pastoral units, but rather small groups of those who had experienced justifying grace and were seeking sanctifying grace.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, the select society was for those who had experienced sanctifying grace and was the group within which the brothers Wesley would have interacted in their pursuit of Christian Perfection. In the select society status and gender were less relevant.

The diagram on the following page depicts the primary institutions and structures of early Methodist community, which were shaped by their understanding of grace. Members moved from the outer rings towards the centre, only through experience of grace and demonstration of the transformation which it brings.<sup>41</sup>

However it is noteworthy that the central ring was for those who had experienced sanctifying grace. The organisation of Methodist societies, classes and bands was designed to draw people from the outer margins to the very centre of their life together which was understood to be sanctification. Commenting on holiness in Hebrews a century ago Radford notes:

the sanctification here is not exactly holiness... but growth into holiness, the process of making the character such as befits the consecration. Only in this sacred covenant relation can any man see the Lord Jesus Christ, and obtain the personal fellowship with him which ensures holiness of character.<sup>42</sup>

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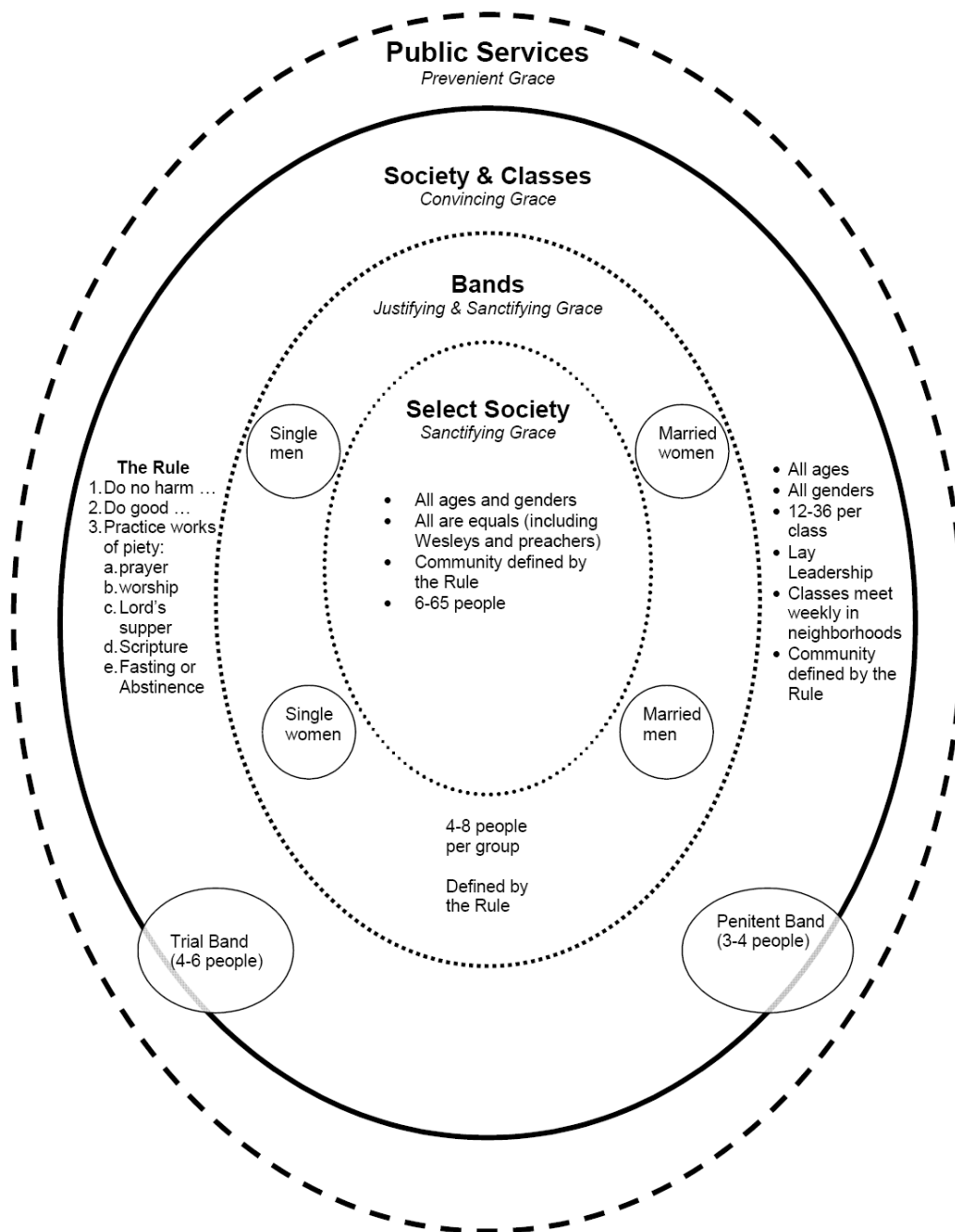
<sup>39</sup> cf. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley Vol.9* (Bicentennial Edition). Ed. Rupert Davies, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 260ff.

<sup>40</sup> This is not to suggest that the early Methodists thought that there were differing gradations of grace but merely that God's grace was experienced in different ways at differing stages of Christian development, principally: prevenient grace, convincing grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace.

<sup>41</sup> For this diagram cf. Albin, 43.

<sup>42</sup> J Grange Radford, *The Eternal Inheritance*, (London, Charles H Kelly, 1913), 267.

## EARLY METHODIST COMMUNITY



From Thomas R Albin, "Inwardly Persuaded": Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism, 'Heart Religion' in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements, Richard B Steele (Ed), London: Scarecrow, 2001, 43.

At least three nuances on holiness emerge from Class and Band Meeting experience which we shall explore here. First, holiness demands belonging and separation; second, it is primarily communal; third, it requires engagement with the world. To a fuller exploration of these nuances we now turn.

#### HOLINESS DEMANDS BELONGING AND SEPARATION

Methodist Band and Class Meetings were not open to all and sundry but only to those who belonged. Those who joined Class Meetings were not necessarily Christians but would be on trial for 2-3 months as they sought an experience of justifying grace. However, entry to Band meetings was by tickets only, issued quarterly. To those who were not judged to be in pursuit of holiness, tickets were not issued for the subsequent quarter. This meant that the Methodist society and its constituent meetings constituted a conscious separation not only from the world at large but also established a clear marker from both the established Church and Nonconformist groups. In this sense, Methodist societies were not very different from other societies and clubs common in 18<sup>th</sup> century England.

However, it is clear that early Methodists understood this separation and belonging to a small group to be crucial to the pursuit of holiness and not merely a club for those who had similar religious interests. In Wesley's own words:

Such a society is no other than 'a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.' That it may the more easily be discerned, whether they are indeed working out their own salvation, each society is divided into smaller companies, called classes, according to their respective places of abode.<sup>43</sup>

#### HOLINESS IS PRIMARILY COMMUNAL

This focus on belonging and separation brings us to a related nuance, that of holiness being primarily communal. Indeed, it is because this communal model was paramount that belonging to the Society, Class and Band were deemed so important. For Wesley, holiness was a communal reality before a personal one. He declared, '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. How clear is this!'<sup>44</sup> Wesley's oft-misquoted view of social holiness is also worth rehearsing here:

'Holy solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than holy adulterers. The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness, but social holiness.... This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loveth God love his brother also.<sup>45</sup>

As a result of this corporate understanding of holiness and as a means of its pursuit, in Methodist Band meetings members were encouraged to confess their sins one to another. The model was not that of a leader hearing the confessions of the group, but rather that of the leader being the first to confess his sins so that together they might build each other up.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> John Wesley, 'Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,' *The Complete Works of John Wesley* [www.godrules.net/library/wesley/274wesley\\_h7.htm](http://www.godrules.net/library/wesley/274wesley_h7.htm) accessed 07 August 2007

<sup>44</sup> John Wesley, 'Of the Church,' *The Sermons of John Wesley* at <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/74/> accessed 22 December 2007

<sup>45</sup> John Wesley, Preface to 1739 collection of *Sacred Hymns & Poems*.

<sup>46</sup> cf. John Wesley, 'A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,' *The Works of John Wesley Vol.9* (Bicentennial Edition) Ed. R Davies, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 267.

#### HOLINESS REQUIRES ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WORLD

Methodist understanding of holiness was very much based on this communal model, which was also the source of much of early Methodist engagement with works of mercy in the communities from which it drew its members. Whether it was the setting up of widows' houses, the founding of schools, the establishing of clinics, or even the creation of a small loans scheme to fund small business start-ups,<sup>47</sup> all were understood to be part of the outworking of the demand for holiness. Therefore, such activities were undertaken not only for the benefit of those who received these services, but also of those who offered them. Holiness in the Class meeting was understood to require separation but also to require engagement with the world.

Class and Band meetings may thus be seen to have served a significant purpose in early Methodist pursuit of that holiness which was the organisation's *raison d'être*. These nuances indicate that holiness is nurtured within a holy community separated from the world, but paradoxically that holiness nonetheless finds expression in service of the world, and in so doing fosters growth towards perfection. Crucially for our purposes, it seems clear that the holiness hermeneutic employed by early Methodists shapes a missional imperative.

#### METHODIST SOCIAL ACTION

Having looked at holiness from the perspective of the Class & Band Meetings we need now to consider the nuance of holiness emerging from Methodist social action. Mr Wesley's 12 rules of a helper included the following:

[Rule #] 1. Be diligent. Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed. Never while away time nor spend more time at any place than is strictly necessary. [Rule #] 2. Be serious. Let your motto be 'Holiness to the Lord.' Avoid all jesting and foolish talking... [Rule #] 11. You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those who want you, but to those who want you most.<sup>48</sup>

From the days of the Holy Club in Oxford, to the work among the poor in Bristol and Newcastle, and work among slaves in the West Indies, Methodism has consistently been engaged in social activism as a conscious part of its pursuit of holiness. So what nuances on holiness might this perspective offer?

Three consistent themes seem to emerge from the Methodist social action: first, holiness requires taking risks, second, it is often to be experienced on the margins, and, thus, third, it often invokes public opprobrium. For these reasons, Methodist social action offered opportunities for learning about and growth in holiness, not in the supportive context of the Band Meeting but rather in the challenging and often hostile context of the wider world.

#### HOLINESS INVOLVES TAKING RISKS

One of the consistent nuances on holiness which emerges from Methodist social activism which so defined the movement is that pursuit of holiness involves risk taking; for the pursuit of holiness is not undertaken from positions of safety and security but in

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<sup>47</sup> cf. *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, 272ff

<sup>48</sup> Methodist Conference, *Minutes of Several Conversations Between The Revd John Wesley, AM., and the Preachers in Connexion with Him*. (London: Methodist Book Room, 1797), 12-13.

those contexts which have inherent risks. This is not to suggest that rash behaviour leads to holiness; rather it is to acknowledge that the pursuit of holiness through social action presumes difficult paths and painful choices.

#### OXFORD HOLY CLUB

We see this willingness to take risks first exhibited at Oxford, when Charles called together a small group of likeminded undergraduates to bind themselves in a union in the pursuit of holiness. This involved disciplines of prayer, fasting, scripture reading, regular partaking of the sacrament, and rigorous examination of each other's conduct within the group. They also held one another accountable for regular participation in public worship and the sacrament. For their seriousness, they were dubbed Bible Bigots, the Supererogation Men, the Holy Club and the Methodists.<sup>49</sup>

Thus far, the only risk taken was that of being ridiculed by fellow undergraduates. However, the Holy Club was not satisfied merely with spiritual exercises; they were also convinced that the pursuit of holiness required social action. Thus began in 1730 regular visits to those interred in Oxford Castle; here they placed themselves at risk of physical harm, for it must not be assumed that all of the inmates welcomed regular visits from these serious upper class young men who were concerned about their souls and bodies. In addition, they placed themselves at the risk of disease, for 18<sup>th</sup> century prisons in general, and Oxford Castle in particular, were not especially healthy environments.

#### FACING THE MOBS

This willingness to place themselves in harm's way was to stand Methodists in good stead when the Evangelical Revival began in earnest and Methodism began to engage in field preaching from 1741. It was not uncommon for Methodist preachers to be attacked by mobs, often encouraged by squire or parson, as they engaged in field preaching. Indeed a number of itinerant preachers died in the early persecutions of the 1740s – 1750s. The Methodist preacher William Seward, considered the first Methodist martyr, was killed by a mob in Hay, South Wales on October 22, 1740.<sup>50</sup> In later years, Primitive Methodists faced similar risks, not from mobs but from authorities because their open-air meetings contravened the Five Mile and Conventicle Acts banning unlicensed preachers. Later still, William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was willing to face risk in the pursuit of holiness; not merely the risk of physical harm among the violent and shady neighbourhoods of London's East End but also the disapproval of his own Methodist Church of the activities of his Christian Mission (later Salvation Army). The Salvation Army also faced mob violence, often supported by publicans who objected to their strong anti-alcohol message and their work among the thieves, prostitutes, gamblers and drunkards of the East End.

#### WORK AMONG SLAVES

However, perhaps one of the most significant areas of risk taking in the pursuit of holiness may be observed in Methodist work among slaves in the Caribbean. Methodists from the very beginning sought to address the social, physical, and educational needs of slaves and, after emancipation in 1834, to former slaves. This very often led to conflict with the vested interests of the 'plantocracy.'

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<sup>49</sup> Richard P Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 38ff.

<sup>50</sup> cf. Clifton F. Guthrie, *Why A Sanctoral Cycle? Or, Are We Ready for Methodist Hagiography?* <http://www.materialreligion.org/journal/saints.html> accessed 21 December 2007

The actual results effected by Nonconformist Missions under these circumstances were small but their presence in the islands was a standing declaration that there was an evangelical character in the Christian religion. By the upper classes it was successfully ignored but among the slaves, even the most ignorant, there was a consciousness of a brightness and a hope unknown before.<sup>51</sup>

In 1760 Methodism spread from Britain, first to the West Indies and then to America. This new development provided Methodism with the opportunity to engage in a new phase of its social action and educational impulse, working among slaves. At one level, the work done among slaves was little different to the work done among the illiterate classes in urban cities across Britain. At another, teaching slaves to read and write in slave owning societies was completely different because of the tensions that existed in these colonies which had vested interests in maintaining the status quo.

Methodism in the West Indies, though to a lesser extent in America was made to choose sides, between slaves and slave owners. In the West Indies Methodism chose the slaves rather than the planters. Perhaps it was the other way round. From its beginning, Methodism in the West Indies assumed the character of the church of the Negroes, as the Anglican communion was the church of the colonists.<sup>52</sup> In some islands, like Barbados, Methodist work among slaves may actually have been hindered by the presence of too many colonists.

In this island the Mission had proved distinctly disappointing. ...It was many years before the black folk in any numbers were brought into the Church. Possibly the fact that the first Society in the island was markedly *White* made the Blacks shy of it! [italics his]<sup>53</sup>

The choice that had to be made was clear from the beginning of Methodism in the West Indies when Nathaniel Gilbert started preaching to his slaves in Antigua:

The Gilberts were socially ostracized by the fashionable circles of Antigua on account of their religious zeal. Their attempt to uplift the slaves excited real alarm.... But their rank and connexions shielded them and with them the cause they had espoused, from the active persecution with which Methodism was subsequently assailed in other parts of the West Indies... circumstance due not to the Gilbert traditions alone, but also to the better tone of Antiguan society....<sup>54</sup>

Methodist focus upon social action reveals a particular nuance of the pursuit of holiness, that it requires a willingness to take risks.

#### HOLINESS IS FOUND ON THE MARGINS

A related nuance of holiness to emerge from Methodist social activism is that holiness is to be experienced on the margins. The Methodist willingness to take risks was not related to foolhardy attitudes or rash dispositions but a fundamental belief that holiness is to be experienced on the margins. In this, they appealed to the gospel witness of

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<sup>51</sup> Caldecott, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Findlay, Vol II, 58.

<sup>53</sup> Findlay Vol II, 59.

<sup>54</sup> Findlay, Vol II, 30-31.

Jesus exercising his ministry among the poor and those on the margins of his society and sought to follow his example. However, it also relates to their conviction that it is in this engagement with the margins that the pursuit of holiness is most fully realized.

In his *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, for example, John Wesley describes how the London Society operated a house for widows, the Poor House:

In this (commonly called The Poor-house) we have now nine widows, one blind woman, two poor children, two upper-servants, a maid and a man. I might add, four or five Preachers; for I myself, as well as the other Preachers who are in town, diet with the poor, on the same food, and at the same table; and we rejoice herein, as a comfortable earnest of our eating bread together in our Father's kingdom.... So that it is not in vain, that, without any design of so doing, we have copied after another of the institutions of the Apostolic age. I can now say to all the world, Come and see how these Christians love one another!<sup>55</sup>

For Wesley this poor house was not merely means of serving the poor; it was a means of living out the requirements of holiness and being active witnesses to the world; such active witness requires engagement with the margins.

#### HOLINESS OFTEN PROVOKES PUBLIC OPPROBRIUM

Owing to this correlation between pursuit of holiness and engagement with the margins, Methodist experience of social action reveals another nuance of holiness: that it often provokes public opprobrium. Public reaction to those seeking holiness is complex. On the one hand, the reactions of those whose vested interests appeared threatened by the pursuit of holiness is perhaps easily understood. This helps to explain the opposition from country squires and parsons to Methodist preachers, of publicans to the Salvation Army, and of the plantocracy to Methodist evangelism among slaves. On the other hand, however, there are occasions when opposition is not so easily explained and seems to represent an instinctive reaction against the very idea of holiness. Whether it is a reaction against perceived hypocrisy, or implied superiority is unclear. What seems clear from Methodist experience of social action is that holiness often provokes public opprobrium. That it is such a consistent theme indicates that it ought to be taken seriously in our exploration of holiness.

These three factors enable us to see how social action for Methodists represents opportunity for growth in holiness. The pursuit of holiness nurtured in the Band meetings was given fuller expression in social action and such engagement in service spurred formation in holiness, not only of individuals but also of the community as a whole.

## **HOLINESS, TRANSFORMATION & MISSION**

Early Methodist understanding of holiness was rooted in grace, transformation, and experience. Holiness, possible only by God's grace, led to transformation and was rooted in experience of that grace in everyday living. However, such experience of transformation needs to be nurtured in community and underpinned by understanding. For these reasons Methodist structures and praxis emerged which offered arenas for transformation and growth in holiness.

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<sup>55</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, 274.

In considering holiness through the lens of class & band meetings and social activism what insights might we gain about holiness as a missional imperative?

#### LEARNING HOLINESS

The primary purpose of the Band meetings was the learning of holiness. The pursuit of holiness involves both teaching and learning. Methodist social activism also highlighted this link in that it was through undertaking social action that Methodists understood the way of holiness to be learned in the world.

This implies that Methodist understanding of holiness is that it both includes and requires some element of learning. Moreover, it is only through experience of God's grace that holiness may be learned. That holiness may be learned is a crucial part of Methodist understanding of holiness, because it means that there is some hope of attaining Christian perfection, though only by God's grace, becoming each passing day more like Christ. Holiness then is, in part at least, a rational and intellectual undertaking, hence the importance given to education in societies. In a 1790 letter to George Holder Wesley declared: 'It cannot be that the people should grow in grace unless they give themselves to reading. A reading people will always be a knowing people.'<sup>56</sup> The people called Methodists were expected to learn the way of holiness.

#### DOING HOLINESS

Another significant nuance is that holiness requires expression, whether in acts of mercy, engaging with current social issues, or focussing on the margins. Holiness in Wesleyan tradition is not quietist but activist; to be perfect is to engage in action consonant with the character of holiness. Such an understanding of holiness has a long history in Christian thought and may be traced back to the ministry of Jesus himself in his loving acts towards those who were sick and sinful, unclean and excluded. Holiness requires action.

Such action often requires engagement with many who are not themselves holy, and indeed with those who appear to be the embodiment of all that is not holy. Nonetheless, it is here that holiness may be apprehended, on the margins — among the poor, the outcasts, and the dregs of society. This is precisely where Methodist ministry was focussed, especially in its early years and in this focus we hear resonances of the ministry of Jesus and the prophets before him. Moreover, this engagement with the margins, this 'doing of holiness' reminds us both of the primarily communal nature of holiness and of the fact that a holy community has space within it for those who are not yet holy.

#### PURSUING HOLINESS

Perhaps the most significant of the insights to emerge is that of the importance of the ongoing pursuit of holiness. The Class and Band Meetings are clear in their understanding of holiness as ongoing pursuit; holiness is not absolute perfection but Christian perfection, which speaks of progress and continuing growth in grace. Social Activism is also clear that holiness requires active pursuit and this pursuit often invokes opposition and requires the taking of risks.

Nonetheless, this question of pursuit continues to be a paradox; holiness requires pursuit and yet remains the gift of God. Nonetheless, for Methodists this paradox is both recognised and accepted. Hence, despite their recognition that holiness is a gift of

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<sup>56</sup> c.f. John Wesley, Letter to John Holder, 1790 <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1790b/> accessed 15 July 2013.



grace they pursued holiness in action, in practice, in prayer, in service, with their minds and with their bodies; holiness remained a constant pursuit.

## **A WESLEYAN READING OF HOLINESS?**

'Holiness without none shall see the Lord' is certainly an eschatologically nuanced reading of holiness in Hebrews. Its object is holy living and dying with the ultimate aim of seeing God beyond this mortal page. However, as we have seen, this eschatological nuance did not result in early Methodists overlooking the present in favour of the future. On the contrary the hermeneutic of holiness which they employed meant that they were even more sharply focussed on the missional imperative of serving the present age, at least in part because they hoped for a better resurrection, and understood love for neighbour to be integral to Christian faith.

A Wesleyan reading of holiness, then, involves the three elements of learning, doing, and pursuing holiness which mirrors the approach early Methodists undertook with new converts. First, converts are taught what they must learn, then do, and finally experience of God's transforming grace. Holiness as viewed through the lens of those Methodist arenas for transformation explored above is based on an understanding of holiness which might be described as learn→ do→become. Such an approach still seems to have much to commend it.

A Wesleyan reading of holiness, then, is to seek nothing less than transformation by grace of all of creation into the image of God by means of learning the true nature of divine Love, expressing this love in social action, and continually engaging in the active pursuit of the Holy One whose name is Love.