

French prisoners of war  
Collection for food & blankets

Critical function of love  
worth/agent/vision(goal)  
joy

## SANCTIFICATION, SOCIETY AND THE POOR

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Wesley insisted that it was the special mission of Methodists to hold the doctrine of Scriptural Holiness and to spread it throughout the land. Sanctification, perfect love, Christian perfection, were various synonyms in his vocabulary for holiness.

### Sanctification in Wesley

Wesley's position is first and foremost a re-statement of an important aspect of the doctrine of grace. It was for the mature Wesley the fullness of faith as justification was its beginning. At first, however, this order of things had been reversed; before 1738 he consistently placed holiness or pure intentions before and preparatory to justification. His sermon on The Circumcision of the Heart was first preached in St. Mary's, Oxford, on January 1, 1733 (Works XI:367).

'Have a pure intention of heart, a steadfast regard to his glory in all your actions..... For then, and not till then, is that mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus'.

(Works V:212)

The focussing of his faith, the personal commitment that took place in Oxford in 1725, brought about a radical change in the seriousness of his religious life. 'Exceedingly affected' by the holiness literature of Jeremy Taylor, Thomas a Kempis and William Law, Wesley resolved to consecrate the whole of his life to love of God and of neighbour. It was at this period, too, that he became closely acquainted with the ancient Christian literature, then newly available in recent editions, and he found in especially Clement of Alexandria and Macarius the Egyptian direction for his spiritual vision.

Unlike the Western (Latin) understanding of perfection as something fixed, static, to which nothing can or need be added, the Eastern tradition spoke in dynamic terms of perfection as completeness (τελειωσις), as the goal or aim (σκοπος) of the Christian life, and conceived of holiness as disciplined love. This was to become fused with Wesley's own Anglican tradition of aspiring love and develop into his most distinctive theological contribution, the possibility of 'a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity,' (Works VII:47).

For Wesley at this stage (1725-38) it was still, as Outler put it, 'a dedicated chore', (1964:10). He strove to fulfil all the spiritual exercises he demanded of himself but without joy or a sense of fulfilment. Nevertheless it is to this period that we

owe the name Methodist and Wesley never rejected the need for discipline and method in Christian living he established then.

Following the tumultuous series of experiences of 1738-9 there was a Copernican shift in his understanding of the priority of grace. From this point on justification stands first, without any preceding merit or holiness of any kind, the result of God's free undeserved grace based upon the work of Christ, and our faith in him.

The undoubted response of the justified sinner is then to reflect God's love in love for God (in praise, worship, joy) and love for neighbour (in good works). But though justification is the foundation of the Christian life, its genesis, it is not the end. The superabundant grace of God nurtures the faith of the believer towards that fullness of faith, that perfect love whereby the Christian attains full maturity in Christ.

This is the process of sanctification, of completeness, and it too is a gift from God. It is not earned by merit, either spiritual or charitable. It may be attained almost simultaneously with justification but more usually it is realised towards the end of a Christian life. Like St. Paul's 'in Christ' it is that bond between Christ and the believer, that identity of will, in which every desire is in subjection to him and all thoughts, words and actions are governed by pure love.

Wesley allows that, as humans, we are still liable to feel temptation and that even the saints are subject to infirmities, ignorance and to making mistakes (Works XI:394). But sanctification precludes fear; because such errors are not deliberate, although we need to repent them we are not condemned.

This relation between justification and sanctification was to be a source of conflict between Wesley and Whitefield and a main cause of separation from Count Von Zinzendorf and the Moravians. Yet Wesley maintained it so consistently that in spite of opposition from Romanists and Quietists and misunderstanding from friends, on September 15 1790 he wrote to Robert Brackenbury,

'This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists, and for the sake of propogating this chiefly He appears to have raised us up'.  
(Letters V111:235)

If Wesley was right, if we have been raised up by God chiefly to propogate this understanding of the way God deals with us, how can we appropriate it for ourselves, propogate it 'over the land', and use it to bring good news to the poor?

## Wesley and the Poor

First of all I believe we must remind ourselves of the impact of Wesley's doctrines on the poor of his own time and on all members of the early Methodist Societies. Preaching the doctrines of the Revival, calling men and women to the life of faith and to Scriptural Holiness, was Wesley's supreme pre-occupation, but for him this was always inseparably linked to a real transformation in the pattern of life.

Most Methodist historians identify the profound effect on the poor and underprivileged of Wesley's unambiguous proclamation of the grace of God for all, the love of God freely given, indeed poured out upon every person however 'vile' that person felt themselves to be. A new sense of personal worth was awakened, a self-respect and sensitivity to the value of others too as children of the One loving God, (Semmel, 1973, & Wearmouth, 1937).

Love for others was the necessary outcome of this love of God and the proper self-regard it evoked. Not only were personal habits altered and high moral standards accepted as the norm but the mutual care engendered in the societies and classes channelled this transformation into much more than personal piety.

The call to perfection as the standard of Christian living also challenged the more affluent. Wesley was outspoken and clear in his condemnation of luxury and his warnings about both the spiritual dangers of wealth,

'O how hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom of God'....

and the practical folly of relying on wealth for happiness or true well-being (Sermon on the Mount, Works VI:14-21).

The process of sanctification transformed cold charity into generous, philanthropic love. Wesley and the early Methodist societies identified and met the needs of the poor wherever and however they could. The necessities of life, food, clothing, shelter were provided and health care developed - Wesley himself studied medicine, wrote Primitive Physic and established clinics. Self help was encouraged by work-shops and loan systems, the need for education acknowledged and schools founded. And although priorities of care might have to be established this love in action extended to all - deserving and undeserving, friend, enemy or stranger, believer or unbeliever.

This teleological perspective also functioned in the public sphere. Social ethics, economics and public affairs constantly raised for Wesley issues that were inconsistent with the concrete manifestation of perfect love. Wesley the writer, pamphleteer, correspondent and preacher challenged such

issues with vehemence and vigour, and always the spring of such activity, stemming from perfect love was Wesley's doctrine of lived faith, the imitation of God, God active in redeeming the created order.

It is to be questioned however whether a transformed economics was central to Wesley's practice of the faith to the extent that he seriously expected or consistently taught the Methodist societies to imitate the commun(al)ity of Acts 2 & 4 as Theodore Jennings suggests (1990 Ch 5). I know of no evidence that any of the early societies put such a scheme into practice, even at the Foundery or City Road. Given Wesley's authority and domination over the movement during his lifetime this is inconceivable had he clearly demanded it of them.

More importantly, perhaps, such a development seems inconsistent with Wesley's injunctions to his members that they should not follow the Quietists in withdrawing from the world. It is difficult to see how the organisation of societies, classes and bands established by Wesley himself could have accommodated such a pentecostal community of goods on any sizeable scale while still engaged in the everyday world of work and family life.

Even more onerous, I believe, is the task Wesley did set them, of remaining fully in the world while still constrained by the demands of disciplined love; rejecting the worldly values of pride and avarice and, as agents of God's love in the world, reaching out to relieve any kind of need or distress. To this end Wesley himself had abandoned the cell-like structure of the Holy Club and the community at Herrnhut for a thorough-going engagement with the world.

In the period following Wesley's death, however, his well known political conservatism and his warnings against public disorder were much more congenial to the Wesleyan Church than openly attacking any contentious issues. It is easy, with historical hindsight to condemn it, though even a superficial study of the prevailing climate of revolution and war across the channel and social and economic dislocation at home should help us better to understand it.

The fact remains that throughout the 19th century the Wesleyan Church became restrained and respectable, a prosperous and successful denomination. Though part of the Non-conformist Conscience which was to have at times, a powerful effect on public life, Wesley's doctrine of sanctification became largely privatised into an attitude of personal piety.

Yet throughout this period there were those, especially in the Primitive Methodist Church who pursued the issues of liberty and equality, social and political reform and the protection of workers even more openly and explicitly than had Wesley himself.

Paradoxically, the very organisation of the church that forbade political activity enabled men (and it was usually men) to make the transition from the relative passivity of a traditional society to begin to address the structural forms of poverty and oppression.

It gave them a voice and confidence to speak in public and it provided a model on which new forms of social and political organisations could be based. Most of all, Wesley's doctrine of God's love for all made concrete and manifest in care for the other, gave them a vision of a more holy society, a society in which wickedness should be restrained and righteousness increased in every part of life.

### **Sanctification and the Poor**

Although Wesley so frequently addressed the causes and effects of poverty it has been pointed out by E.P. Thompson (1964) and others that he failed to take sufficiently seriously the institutional forms of oppression even then being attacked by secular voices. It is important here to remember not only that his supreme aim was the spread of scriptural holiness, but that he saw disorder, violence and war as the very antithesis of the love of God, and he had experienced them.

As a boy he could have spoken with people who remembered the Civil War in England; as a young man he experienced the Jacobite uprising and the battle of Culloden, and later the Revolutions in America and France. In England rioting, practically the only means of popular opposition, was frequent and often violent. In most cases the groups who suffered most were the poor themselves. It is also the case that Wesley's Tory and Monarchist predisposition did nothing to weaken his conviction that direct political, social and economic involvement was not in keeping with ordered, disciplined Christian love.

It was possible for Wesley to see the solution of social as well as personal ills in the re-orientation of individual lives toward the goal of perfection. In An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion he set it out clearly,

'This love we believe to be the medicine of life, the never failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices of men. Wherever this is, there are virtue and happiness going hand in hand' (Works VI:11:3).

Evangelical Christians in the Wesley tradition would still maintain that this is the only way to bring about social righteousness, and all Methodists would surely accept that were sanctification to become a universal reality this would indeed be good news to all people, rich and poor.

In the meantime, however, confronted by the harsh realities of the world we live in we must ask how we can interpret the faith, including the doctrine of sanctification, to our own culture as creatively and fearlessly as Wesley did to his. How can the goal (σκοπος) of this kind of completeness (τελειωσις) inform our Christian discipleship as we address the problem of poverty? The difficulties are almost overwhelming.

While we acknowledge the continuing need to preach for conversion, to bring all people to a personal act of commitment and the beginning of sanctification, the possibility of anything like a sanctified society seems impossibly Utopian. We must not close our eyes to the fact that more people in the world belong to other world faiths than to Christianity, that secularism is widespread and growing and that many who claim to follow the way of Christ would not be prepared to undertake this kind of commitment. Sanctification is not going to be a mass movement.

At the same time we can better understand, as Wesley could not, the functioning of groups and organisations, the structural and institutional factors, many of them of transnational and even cosmic significance, that influence the individual in society. We are aware of the strength of economic, environmental and political interests involved in the persistence of poverty.

Are the only alternatives for us then either an unrealistic optimism about the prospect of a future sanctified society or a frank recognition that the doctrine of sanctification has only limited and individual value?

I suggest there may be a third more appropriate way in which Wesley's descendents can approach this doctrine today, faithfully but realistically - a more thorough-going teleological way. So I suggest we should now ask

i) What would a sanctified society be like; what would be its characteristics?

ii) How can we so method-ise our own spiritual journey so as to embrace the quest for universal completeness in our own lives and in the structures of modern society?

iii) What is the role of the church in a still sinful world?

i) **The Vision.** Visions of the righteous, holy society, society renewed in the image of God, are familiar to us from the Old Testament prophets, the teaching of Jesus, the Revelation of St John, St Augustine's City of God and many others. We know that in this kind of society there would be no barriers between people on the basis of race, class or gender. The Tower of Babel image would be reversed and contemporary evaluations of a person's worth turned upside down. There would be no need for the kind of fear that generates a thirst for power.

Most of all, the knowledge that God's justice is grace would radically alter economic expectations and attitudes making the exploitation of others impossible. There would be no Christian ambivalence towards poverty in a sanctified society; we should no longer be able to idealise the poor whilst maintaining hierarchical, privileged structures that perpetuate their poverty. We should no longer be able to assert the value of all before God whilst simply dumping on the hungry our own surplus food mountains for our own economic advantage. God's grace is available for all and super-abundant; so too would be the properly husbanded natural resources of the created world.

Although we have from Wesley no complete statement about his views on a sanctified society his writings are full of references to the kind of attitudes and actions required from those who would belong to it,

'The pure love of God and man.....It is love governing the heart and life, running through all our tempers words and actions, reigning alone in the heart and life, this is the whole of scriptural perfection'(Works XI:397).

We cannot agree with Warner (1930:71) that this is primarily a system of social ethics, or even an ethic with a theological basis. It is the incessant and unlimited love of God being made manifest, becoming concrete in the actions and attitudes of the being-sanctified people towards their neighbours, the critical principle at work in the individual to bring about dissatisfaction with what is and motivate change.

Part of Wesley's genius was to bring teleology to bear on the life of holiness which, founded in faith is perfected by works, not to accumulate merit but as a necessary outcome of the love of God to all. Inevitably then the task will include the promotion of those things that would be in keeping with holiness and the overcoming of those that oppose it - not yet in a sanctified society or even a Pentecostal community but in the real world we all inhabit now.

ii) **The Task.** As we noted earlier, there is evidence that the introduction of teleology into the lives of the poor in Wesley's day enlightened and empowered them, giving them meaning purpose and direction. There is also evidence from people like Elsa Tamez and Theodore Jennings that some of the poor in Latin America can similarly find in Wesley's teaching echoes of their own situation and a new voice to express it. It may be possible to do this in other parts of the world too.

It may also be possible that the organisation and structure of the Methodist church, the experience of group discussion and cooperative decision making, may help to develop collaborative styles of action in economic and social spheres as they did in 18th century England.

But the global nature of poverty, its very scope, makes it imperative that, if the poor are to find a voice that can be heard, there are those in the wealthy nations who not only sympathise with them but articulate their cause.

Our concern, like that of Wesley, must extend not only to the Christian or deserving poor but to all the townships of South Africa, the plains of Bangladesh, the starving in Somalia. And what of the poor in our wealthy post industrial societies—the homeless and marginalised, the powerless, and those Marx called the lumpen proletariat?

There can be no doubt today that our neighbours include all who are homeless, hungry, poor or oppressed, and those generations yet unborn. They are brought daily into our living rooms and have become intimately known to us. We are moved to give aid but, however generous, this will never be effective unless we also use our economic and political muscle to change the unjust structure of international trade, to bring about the end of conflicts that prevent the relief of suffering (even at the expense of our own armaments trade) and to alter attitudes in our own societies.

The persistence of the Halevy-Thompson debate is sufficient reminder that we should expect disagreement about the best course of action and we will not be immune from ignorance or error. Too often, however, we are guilty of superficial judgements that take too little account of the facts of a situation. Our good works also entail the use of our method-ism and discipline in fact finding and research. Irrelevant and inaccurate moral appeals are simply not enough.

In this respect we need not only greater awareness at the grass roots but more politicians and economists who have a vision of and a commitment to the characteristics of a sanctified society— even more perhaps than we need theologians. How can the unacceptable face of capitalism be regulated, its excesses restrained, while the wealth creation of wise stewardship is encouraged in the developing as well as the developed world?

Theological vision has to be translated into viable and large scale economic and political strategies if it is to achieve its purpose. We have at times been guilty of over simplifying, if not sentimentalising, complex and intractable problems. This is not only bad theology, it is tactically counter productive, for those we address cannot take us seriously.

Perhaps for the first time a lever is becoming available to us by which governments may be forced to take more into account the issues of poverty and that is the whole question of the environment and climate change. The self interest of the developed nations is now threatened as it was never seen to be threatened by poverty, in spite of the Brandt Report.

The integrity of creation, in the sense that the problems of the environment and the poor are inextricably bound together, require us to set the energetic enterprises of a market economy within a framework of acceptable control which takes a holistic view of the needs of the environment and development, the use of resources and the distribution of wealth.

The lone prophetic voice can be a powerful instrument. But Wesley established Connexions of like minded societies. What could be accomplished if all people in the Wesleyan traditions, pursuing sanctification in their own lives, strove methodically on behalf of the poor in the church and in the world?

As we noted above there were those in 19th century Methodism who, sometimes in defiance of their church, were able so to method-ise agricultural workers as at Tolpuddle, coalminers in Durham and Wales and textile operatives in Yorkshire and Lancashire that great changes began to appear in the political, social and economic life of the nation.

iii) **The Church.** This brings us to the role of the church which is both communion of saints and school for sinners. As creature the church is also subject to cultural pressures and theology develops within and out of a particular time and place. So the images of a God of power that originated from the imperial structures of the ancient world have less impact today than models of vulnerability and powerlessness (eg J. Moltmann 1976, and E. Jungel 1983).

Yet these too must be balanced by the faith that God is able to bring to completeness the work that has been begun, in us and in the whole of creation. Our finiteness, particularity and partiality will always make our theology provisional, constantly requiring reflection and restatement.

Some of the pioneers of Liberation Theology warned that part of the socio-economic task of church includes a self critical awareness of the church too (eg M. Bonino 1977, and J. B. Metz 1971). How can the church overcome sin in herself and in society without producing new sins in the process?

Too often the churches of the wealthy developed nations have been complacent and uncritical in support of the status quo. We have been prone to identify Christianity with a particular form of human culture and then to idolise it. Some Liberation Theology has been similarly uncritical in its elevation of a particular (in this case Marxist) analysis of society into a theological tenet.

The churches of the rich nations must accept their share of the sin of creating and perpetuating poverty. We have also, in spite of Wesley, been guilty of the sin of quietism, refusing to confront the causes and effects of poverty.

The process of sanctification takes place not in a protected environment but in a sinful world. Images of sin as a snare are not inappropriate; we are enmeshed in it. Sin, the deliberate denial of the will of God, by the individual and in the structures of society, is a pressing reality. We are confronted at times by apparently overwhelming evil in both rich and poor and there is no cheap or easy answer.

The cross is not only about a single sacrificial death a long time ago. It speaks also about the fact that God loves humanity and that a move from the present unjust and sinful world to one in which His will is done can only be at considerable cost.

This proclamation is part of the traditional task of the church. To call people to a life of holiness is part of the traditional task of Methodism. Today this goal should include a full awareness of its implications concerning the poor, the demands of perfect love taught by Wesley to the people called Methodist.

The church itself can also take action to bring about change - directly in a local situation, in cooperation with other Non-Government Organisations and through political pressure.

Most of all perhaps the church needs to persevere, to remain faithful. The issues are complex and difficult and poverty will not easily be overcome. But this too is in keeping with Wesley's understanding of holiness as a process towards completeness.

Finally we must ask whether there are grounds for hope. How can we recognise the full weight of sin in the world and yet speak of a sanctified society. Was Wesley too optimistic?

As far as the wide spread of Scriptural Holiness is concerned we have to concede that this did not happen. Nor, in human terms, can we expect it to happen in the foreseeable future. But in his sermon on the Second Coming Wesley seems to have expected the sanctification of society at the end time and perhaps we can best approach this question if teleology gives way to eschatology.

To be true to Wesley's doctrine of sanctification this would have to be the kind of Anticipated Eschatology found in much of the teaching of Jesus on the Kingdom of God - the already but not yet, the present but still to come - or as Bonhoeffer put it the Ultimate present in the Penultimate. This is the standard of disciplined love by which those seeking sanctification must live in the present.

In the meantime the church lives as the faithful remnant fulfilling its mission to be light, leaven, salt and sign of the Kingdom and, even in the presence of sin, 'We press on towards the goal ( $\sigma\kappa\epsilon\pi\omicron\varsigma$ ) for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus', (Phil. 3:14).

