

THE NINTH OXFORD INSTITUTE OF METHODIST THEOLOGICAL STUDIES  
Theme: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition  
28 July - 7 August 1992  
Somerville College, Oxford, U.K.

EXPERIMENTAL RELIGION  
John Wesley's Approach to Theology  
and Ministry to the Poor

by  
Donald A. D. Thorsen  
Associate Professor of Theology  
C.P. Haggard School of Theology  
Azusa Pacific University  
Azusa, California, U.S.A.

Introduction

In the Preface to Sermons on Several Occasions, John Wesley identified his writings as an endeavor "to describe the true, the scriptural, experimental religion."<sup>1</sup> It does not surprise us that Wesley endeavored to describe that which is true. Nor does it surprise us that Wesley endeavored to describe that which is scriptural. But it may not be clear to everyone concerning what Wesley meant by experimental religion.

Wesley's reference to experimental religion seems to have at least two meanings. The first and primary meaning relates to Wesley's expectation that the truths of scripture become manifest in the experience--or experimental dimension--of people's lives. Scriptural truths should make reasonable sense to us, and they should prove to be true in life. For example, Wesley believed that experience confirmed the scriptural promise that the Holy Spirit bears witness with our own spirits that we are children of God.<sup>2</sup> The second and consequent meaning of the term relates to Wesley's expectation that we should experiment with (or test) what we find in scripture in order to verify its truthfulness and relevance for our lives. In terms of our relationship with God and with others--particularly in ministry--we should test the words of scripture so that we may confirm their truthfulness for ourselves. Having confirmed the truthfulness of scriptural teachings, we should continue to experiment in order to understand and apply those teachings to life.

A special emphasis of Wesley's ministry had to do with serving the many needs of the poor. Albert Outler describes the masses of poor people during eighteenth century England as "Wesley's self-chosen constituency: 'Christ's poor'."<sup>3</sup> Wesley's emphasis upon ministering to the poor came as a result of his belief in such an emphasis in scripture. The application of his emphasis upon ministering to the poor evolved through a process of trial and error by which Wesley sought to serve them in the most holistic and effective way possible. Wesley's openness to

experimentation in understanding and applying scriptural truths remains a tremendous legacy to those of us who wish to continue in a tradition of holistic and effective ministry to the poor.

Although Wesley recognized limitations in the use of experimentation in Christianity, he believed in an experimental approach to understanding and applying practically scriptural truths to life and ministry, especially ministry to the poor. In order to appreciate the experimental nature of Wesley's thought, it will first be necessary to investigate the experimental dimension and applications of his theology in general. Then it will be possible to demonstrate the particular relevance of experimental religion for ministering in a practical manner to the complex and changing needs of poor people.

### Experimental Theology

Use of the adjective "experimental" in description of religious experience goes back at least as far as the seventeenth century in Great Britain. George Fox wrote the following description of his conversion in 1647:

Then the Lord let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him the glory. For all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief, as I had been; that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence, who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. . . and this I knew experimentally.<sup>4</sup>

In this passage from his Journal, Fox described the personal assurance of salvation that occurred in his life.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, Anglican theology became enamored with the empirical methodology of John Locke and other British empiricists. Use of the term experimental took on meaning that referred to more than personal religious experience. Like many other Anglicans, Wesley drew upon the idiom of British empiricism in order to articulate his Christian faith and practice.<sup>5</sup> Wesley did not use the idiom of experimental religion often, but its appearance never seemed out of place with his theology. Like Fox, Wesley used the term in relationship to personal religious experience. For example, prior to his conversion, Wesley questioned biblical teachings concerning instantaneous conversion. But, according to Wesley, "the concurring evidence of several living witnesses" confirmed the reality of instantaneous conversion.<sup>6</sup> Later Wesley encouraged his readers to experiment for themselves, for example, concerning that which he wrote about the role of reason in religion. He said, "But in a point of so unspeakable importance do not depend on the word of another; but retire for a while from the busy world, and make the experiment yourself."<sup>7</sup>

With regard to doctrine, Wesley did not hesitate to use experimental idiom. Wesley considered all human knowledge to be experimental in nature. So it is no surprise that he considered doctrinal formulations to be hypothetical interpretations of

scripture, which required ongoing testing. For example, Wesley responded to theological queries on the basis of what he described as "the Scripture hypothesis."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Wesley considered the phenomenological growth of Christian faith to begin as a hypothesis that expects confirmation by reason as well as experience.<sup>9</sup> So, for the most part, Wesley did not cavil over diverse theological opinions. He tolerated a degree of flexibility or liberality without compromising that which he considered to be essential to the gospel message. Wesley endeavored to maintain tolerance in what he considered nonessential matters of theology. Wesley distinguished, for example, in the Model Deed, between what is scripturally essential or fundamental and what is nonessential or a matter of conscience. Today we might disagree with what Wesley considered essential and nonessential, but the approach to theology he modeled provides insight for dealing with contemporary issues of ministry.

### Experimental Ministry

The most striking place in which Wesley's experimental approach to religion arises occurs in the practical conduct of the church's ministry. Wesley came to believe that scripture does not articulate a specific model for how the church should be formally organized or minister.<sup>10</sup> Thus a degree of latitude exists in which one may experiment with the ways in which one ministers. To be sure, Wesley avoided the kind of speculative and practical latitudinarianism that he believed to be unfaithful to scripture. His "catholic spirit" did not prevent him from following a concern to believe and practice the gospel in conformity with scripture and the orthodox tradition inaugurated in Christian antiquity.<sup>11</sup> But what scripture does not forbid or when it does not give specific guidance concerning particular issues, Wesley believed that he had liberty to experiment with ways in which to minister.

With regard to ministry in general, it is well known that Wesley took liberties in experimenting with field preaching, small groups, popular hymnody, lay ministry, ordination, and the defacto creation of a new denomination. Wesley did not apologize for capitalizing on these liberties. Indeed he gloried in them, and generally encouraged others within the Methodist connection to do the same. Wesley kept personal oversight over innovations by the Methodists, but he did so in order to insure that such innovations remained consistent with the essential teachings of scripture and Christian antiquity.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Wesley's ministry had to do with experimenting with ways in which to demonstrate his preferential care for the needs of the poor. He had special compassion for the physical as well as spiritual needs of poor people. In ministering to people's physical needs, Wesley experimented with a variety of ways in which to fulfill biblical emphases upon social, political, and economic justice. Considering the historical context in which he lived and ministered,

Wesley excelled in finding constructive ways in which to minister to the poor and--to a significant degree--work to transform injustices present in eighteenth century Great Britain. His care for souls truly extended to the whole person.

### Experimental Ministries to the Poor

Wesley sought to provide ways in which to minister to the poor, that is, people who included the impoverished, uneducated, sick, and those who--for various reasons--were oppressed or dispossessed by society such as slaves and prisoners. For example, Wesley provided basic medical care and wrote simple medical manuals in order to aid those who could not afford professional care.<sup>12</sup> He also established what came to be known as "The Poor House" for those, especially widows, who could not care for themselves, and he founded an orphanage.<sup>13</sup> Wesley took it upon himself to educate those who otherwise did not have the means to be educated. He originally intended to teach the children himself. But Wesley said that "after several unsuccessful trials," he found better people "of sufficient knowledge, who had talents for, and their hearts in, the work."<sup>14</sup> At the Kingswood School, Wesley recognized that he needed to make variations in the educational structure after many years of trial and error in its development.<sup>15</sup> Wesley even made it possible for people to receive money who had immediate needs for small loans by establishing a benevolent loan fund. The only stipulation was that borrowers should repay the loan within three months.<sup>16</sup>

Wesley's concern for the poor extended beyond actual acts of good will toward the poor. Whole sermons--and many of them--were written for the purpose of instructing the Methodists on how to handle their money for the expressed goal of both aiding the work of the ministry and for helping the needs of the poor. Wesley's best known sermon dealing with money is entitled "The Use of Money." Here Wesley exhorted Christians to gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.<sup>17</sup> Wesley soon discovered that his Methodist followers were good at adhering to the first two principles, but ignored the third principle, which stood against surplus accumulation. Wesley considered surplus accumulation to be the leading sin of Christian praxis.<sup>18</sup> So concerned was Wesley over the misuse of money--and corresponding injustices against the poor--that he wrote his sermons warning about the spiritual and social dangers of accumulating surplus wealth. Outler aptly recognizes that Wesley's sermons were in clear contrast to the notion, proffered by the Puritans, but approved by others, that honestly earned wealth is a sign and measure of divine favour. What is interesting is that Wesley's economic radicalism on this point has been ignored, not only by most Methodists, but the economic historians as well.<sup>19</sup>

Although Wesley may not have been able to find scriptures or church tradition to convince the Methodists of the dangers of accumulating surplus wealth, he thought that experience provided

ample proof of its dangers both to the spiritual well-being of the would-be giver of money and to the physical well-being of the would-be recipient of money.

Most Wesley scholars recognize that Wesley's teachings on social holiness or social responsibility concentrate on the renewal of society rather than on its reformation or transformation. Wesley lived in an era which did not possess the same social consciousness shared by contemporary Christians, so we must not expect from Wesley the kind of theological sensitivity and praxis expected by Christians today. But in his ecclesial and economic radicalism Wesley laid the experimental framework for later involvements by Methodists, for example, their role in the growth of the British liberal party and in the rise of socialism. In the words of Vivian Green, Wesley's "Religious radicalism had acted as a midwife to political reform."<sup>20</sup> Thus we are not surprised when, for example, Colin Williams finds in Wesley's abolitionist support of Wilberforce, a belief that God appoints times (kairoi) when an attack on great social evils can succeed, but that for their success the complete obedience of his followers and the leaders he has appointed is required.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

Wesley took a tantalizing experimental approach to the understanding and application of theology, especially in ministry to the poor. While maintaining a concern for the primacy of scriptural authority and fidelity to Christian antiquity, liberty can and should be taken in order to minister creatively to the complex and changing needs of people.

Christians in the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions should affirm, appreciate, and explore implications of Wesley's experimental approach to Christianity. First, it is important to do this for encouraging an individual's experimental encounter with God's salvation and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Second, it is important for the sake of experimentally devising holistic and effective ways in which to minister to all people, especially the poor.

We should use our minds creatively to find ways in which to minister. This involves a recognition of the nature and extent of the plight of the poor in our own countries as well as around the world. We should be consistent as well as reasonable in our zeal to minister.

Finally, the test of experience should do more than help us to discern, confirm, and illuminate the truths of scripture, concerning the needs of the poor. It should also help us to discover which approaches are the most healthy and effective in the particular contexts in which we minister. We should not be discouraged over the diversity of ministries and approaches to ministry which may be required, given the extent of impoverishment around the world. Nor should we be discouraged if we have to reevaluate and reapply our views of and ministry to the poor.

## Endnotes

1. John Wesley, preface, 6, Sermons on Several Occasions, The Works of John Wesley, Bicentennial Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984) 1:106.

2. See "The Witness of the Spirit, I" (1746, sermon 10), "The Witness of the Spirit, II" (1767, sermon 11), and "The Witness of Our Own Spirit" (1746, sermon 12), Works (Bicentennial ed.) 1:267-313.

3. Albert C. Outler, introductory comment, "The Use of Money" (1760, Sermon 50), Works (Bicentennial ed.) 2:263.

4. George Fox, The Journal of George Fox, ed. Rufus Jones (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1976) 82.

5. See Richard E. Brantley, Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1984).

6. Journal, 22 April 1738, Works (Bicentennial ed.) 18:234.

7. "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered" (1781, sermon 70), II.3, Works (Bicentennial ed.) 2:594-95.

8. For example, see "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," 9, Works (Oxford ed.) 11:47-48.

9. See George Eayrs, John Wesley: Christian Philosopher and Church Founder (London: Epworth, 1926) 59-60.

10. See the Minutes of 1747, quoted by John S. Simon, John Wesley and the Advance of Methodism (London: The Epworth Press, 1921) 37-38.

11. See "Catholic Spirit" (1750, sermon 39) Works (Bicentennial ed.) 2:79-96.

12. In 1747 Wesley first published Primitive Physic[k, or an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases] (1747; London: Epworth Press, 1960). This simple medical manual was reprinted twenty-one times by 1785.

13. See "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," XIII-XIV, Works (Jackson ed.) 8:265-267.

14. "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," XIV.2, Works (Jackson ed.) 8:266.

15. See "A Plain Account of Kingswood School," 1, Works (Jackson ed.) 13:289.

16. See "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," XV, Works (Jackson ed.) 8:267-268.

17. See "The Use of Money" (1760, sermon 50), Works (Bicentennial ed.) 2:263-280.

18. See Outler, introductory comment, "The Danger of Riches" (1781, sermon 87), Works (Bicentennial ed.) 3:227.

19. Outler, introductory comment, "The Danger of Riches" (1781, sermon 87) 3:228.

20. Vivian H. H. Green, John Wesley (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964) 148.

21. Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960) 197n13.

