

# *The Times They Are A-Changin': Three approaches to Wesleyan holiness in 1960s Britain*

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## Abstract

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and in spite of its neglect, British Methodism continued to uphold the permanent value of the Wesleyan holiness tradition, with William Sangster its staunchest advocate. Sangster's death in 1960, at the dawn of a decade of profound cultural and religious change, left the tradition without a champion at a time when its relevance for the modern world was seriously questioned. In this context, three divergent approaches to the Wesleyan holiness tradition may be seen in the works of David Head, Tom Meadley, and John Vincent. Meadley worked with the tradition, recasting it in a fresh and practical way; Head – more influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer than Wesley – almost bypassed the tradition yet firmly retained the terminology of holiness; whilst Vincent, dismissed the tradition as no longer relevant, calling Methodists instead to radical discipleship. Despite their different approaches, all three were united in their profound concern for Christian engagement with the modern world. Although they signal the demise of the tradition, they prove faithful to what lies at its core: a devotion to God that leads to Christ-like service of others, especially those who need us most.

## Introduction

In the dark days of World War II, W. E. Sangster, Superintendent minister at Westminster Central Hall, divided his evenings between assisting the 'bombed-out people' in the basement come air-raid shelter beneath the Hall, and writing his doctoral thesis on Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, published in 1943 as *The Path to Perfection*.<sup>1</sup> Sangster was one of Methodism's most celebrated preachers, forming a popular triumvirate in mid-century London with Leslie Weatherhead and Donald Soper. He was also a passionate advocate of the Wesleyan holiness tradition, and concerned about its neglect, which he attributed in part to aspects of the tradition considered unsustainable 'in the light of modern biblical, theological and psychological knowledge,' particularly the understanding of sin.<sup>2</sup> He endeavoured to restate it both in scholarly and everyday terms, and the energy and

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<sup>1</sup> W.E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection: An Examination and Restatement of John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1957), p 6.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew J Cheadle, *William Sangster: Heir of John Wesley?* (Sheffield: The Wesley Fellowship, 2013), p 7. For an excellent and thorough account of Sangster's views, see, *W.E. Sangster - Herald of Holiness : A Critical Analysis of the Doctrines of Sanctification and Perfection in the Thought of W.E. Sangster*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010).

passion with which he did so ensured that Wesley's doctrine was given prominence in the immediate post-war years. In *Methodism: Her unfinished task*, the question he posed was simply stated:

Called into being by God, what work did God design that it should do?'  
'John Wesley always insisted that the purpose of Methodism was 'to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land'. The phrase sounds a little archaic today but no man can miss the meaning. The people were to be made Christ-like. Has it been done?'<sup>3</sup>

## The Path to Perfection in Post-war Methodism

The Methodist Church to which that challenge was directed, became energised in the post-war years into rebuilding and renewing itself. Sangster was determined that the Wesleyan tradition would be at the heart of that renewal, continuing to inform the Church's mission, fashioning a Christ-like people and spreading 'scriptural holiness'. He was one of the architects of *The Message and Mission of Methodism*, the impressive and wide-ranging document published by the Methodist Conference in book form in 1946, that set out the Church's new agenda.<sup>4</sup> Sangster's influence may be seen in its affirmation of the permanent value of Wesleyan holiness despite the defects that both he and Robert Newton Flew had identified,<sup>5</sup> and in its call for a 'revival of sanctity' and the development of Christian character that would provide credible witness in Britain's changing religious landscape in which Christianity was no longer central to the lives of a great many of its citizens.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> W. E. Sangster, *Methodism, Her Unfinished Task*, Revised ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1950), pp 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> The Methodist Church, *The Message and Mission of Methodism* (London: The Epworth Press, 1946), p vii.

<sup>5</sup> The report describes the tradition's 'emphasis upon sanctity or perfect love,' by which we are confronted 'with our true destiny' and its refusal to set a limit 'to the sovereign love of God,' as the two foremost factors that comprise its permanent value. The report upholds the inherent difficulties in Wesley's doctrine to which Flew and Sangster had drawn attention as being its 'defective understanding of sin,' the impossibility of knowing ourselves sufficiently to claim 'an assurance that sin has been taken away,' and a false separation between sacred and secular stemming from its failure to view the latter 'as a medium through which they might have communion with God.' *ibid.*, pp 22-24. For Flew's critique, see, Chapter XX, in R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology: An Historical Study of the Christian Ideal for the Present Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp 313-41.

<sup>6</sup> See the section on modern humanism that reveals a new awareness of the changing place of Christianity within British society: 'In a world of many conflicts, the major conflict is between a view of life centred in the revelation of God given in Jesus Christ and a view of life centred in man and his ideals to the exclusion of any conscious dependence upon God. Amid the ruins of human effort, there is today a widespread belief in man's power to manage human affairs.' The Methodist Church, *The Message and Mission of Methodism*, pp 50-51.

As President of the Methodist Conference from 1950 to 1951, Sangster used the opportunity to call Methodists back to their roots, reminding the Conference at his induction at Bradford in July 1950 that Methodism had been ‘raised up to spread “Scriptural Holiness” throughout the land,’ a theme echoed in his address to the Ministerial Session of the Conference, in which he expressed his concern for those outside the Church who saw little that was distinctive and attractive in the lives of Church members, and implored his colleagues: ‘I plead with you to preach holiness.’<sup>7</sup> That address, as Andrew Cheatele remarks, ‘reads like a lament on the neglect of this doctrine in British Methodism with Sangster appealing for attention to this part of John Wesley’s heritage; that explicitly held a goal before the people:’

One of the greatest services, therefore, which John Wesley rendered our fathers was that he was all the time holding before them a goal. We do not, to the same extent, hold a goal before our people. Our danger is tacitly to accept both for ourselves and our people a lower standard than we ought. Because we are afraid to say, ‘The perfect is possible,’ we are in danger of implying that to be ‘highly respectable’ is enough. It isn’t.<sup>8</sup>

In his 1953 New Year sermon, *What a Religious Revival Might Do For Britain*, published in the *Methodist Recorder* to begin the Methodist Year of Evangelism, Sangster expressed the hopes of many for a revival that would impact church and nation, and which, he believed, required not only an emphasis on evangelism but equally on holiness.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as the 1950s progressed, it was becoming clear that hopes for revival were not easily realised. As General Secretary of the Methodist Home Mission Department, Sangster was aware of the deepening challenge facing the Church, as he reported to the 1957 Conference:

We are appalled...by the granite indifference of the artisan masses to our faith... Our own Church membership has decreased again. While there are places where the work is gloriously reviving, there is no obvious revival of religion in the nation as a whole... It is not militant opposition... The simple truth is that these people feel no need for the goods which they think we are offering.<sup>10</sup>

Yet Sangster was not disheartened, remaining convinced that holiness was the key to a re-invigorated Church, credible witness and effective evangelism in the modern world. A year

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Sangster, *Doctor Sangster* (London: The Epworth Press, 1962), p 208.

<sup>8</sup> Cheatele, *W.E. Sangster - Herald of Holiness*, p 153.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 155.

<sup>10</sup> Sangster, *Doctor Sangster*, pp 228-29.

later, however, Sangster was diagnosed with the muscular atrophy that would soon prevent him from preaching and eventually lead to his death shortly before his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1960, Wesley Day. It marked the end of an era in more ways than one. With Sangster's death, Methodism lost perhaps the only advocate of the Wesleyan holiness tradition who commanded sufficient respect across the Church for that tradition to gain a widespread hearing. And because Sangster may be seen to represent the high hopes held out in the early post-war years for the renewal of Methodism and the success of its historic mission – hopes which had been shaken during the 1950s – then his death also marks, as Martin Wellings suggests 'the steady ebbing of confidence in the ability of the Methodist Church to renew itself, to make an impact on British society and thus successfully to serve the present age in the changing conditions of post-war Britain.'<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Sangster died ahead of the rapid changes and yet greater challenges that presented themselves as the new decade dawned – a decade that would prove to be a gamechanger, as Bob Dylan's song, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, forewarned. What place would there be for the holiness tradition and who would be its exponents in this brave new world?

## Singing the Lord's song in a strange land

In September 1960, the Reverend David Mason moved to London's North Kensington to become minister of Lancaster Road Methodist Church (today's Notting Hill Methodist Church). On the face of it, Mason and his wife, Ann, were just one of many Methodist ministerial families moving that year, but this was no ordinary appointment. It was a new and bold venture in ministry and mission under the auspices of Donald Soper and the West London Mission, emblematic of the times, and undertaken in response to the social pressures and tensions that had erupted two years earlier with the Notting Hill race riots. Mason was later joined by two gifted colleagues, Norwyn Denny, a former missionary in Jamaica, and Geoffrey Ainger, who had worked in New York's East Harlem district.<sup>12</sup> Thus was born the Notting Hill Group Ministry, which signalled not only a new approach to meet

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Wellings, "Renewal, Reunion and Revival: Three British Methodist Approaches to 'Serving the Present Age' in the 1950s," <http://divinity.duke.edu/oxford/docs/2007papers/2007-3Wellings.pdf> accessed 31 July 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Frost, *Goodwill on Fire: Donald Soper's Life and Mission* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), p 179.

new social challenges, but also the turn to the world that would become one of the hallmarks of the 1960s – the world would now set the agenda.

Everywhere it seemed, change was in the air. In 1961, the New English Bible was published and became a 'best-seller,' its contemporary style and language seemingly more suited to the new era.<sup>13</sup> In the Catholic world, Pope John announced the Second Vatican Council, which opened in 1962, and 'talked of *aggiornamento* (a bringing up to date), of taking note of the "signs of the times."' <sup>14</sup> Scarcely had the Council begun its deliberations than in 1963 the Beatles burst upon the scene, greeted by scenes of widespread hysteria among the post-war teenage generation. It soon became clear that a major cultural shift was underway, with rapid changes in popular music, fashion, and sexual morality. As Callum Brown asserts, 'In this maelstrom, traditional religious conceptions of piety were to be suddenly shattered, ending centuries of consensus Christian culture in Britain.'<sup>15</sup> Traditional conceptions of God were also called into question by John Robinson's *Honest to God*, which caused a furore, and yet was written with the intention of making the faith intelligible to the ordinary person.<sup>16</sup> This was the unsettling context in which Methodists were forced to grapple with the relevance of their historic tradition in what was now a very different world. The torch had been passed to a new generation, and three Methodist scholars stepped forward to signal the way: David Head, Tom Meadley, and John Vincent. Their respective books, published during the 1960s, represent three very different approaches to the Methodist holiness tradition taken during the decade. Whilst Head and Meadley continued to work with the tradition, albeit from their respective radical and conservative perspectives, Vincent saw no continuing role for it. Their writings warrant closer examination if we are to understand the reasoning behind their divergent views and the extent to which they saw holiness as of value to Methodist life and mission in the latter part of the twentieth century.

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<sup>13</sup> Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-2000* (London: SCM Press, 2001), p 534.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 520.

<sup>15</sup> Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2006), p 224.

<sup>16</sup> Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-2000*, p 537.

### David Head: *Seek a City Saint*<sup>17</sup>

In his 1965 Lent book, David Head wrestles with the notion of holiness, asking whether it remains appropriate in the modern world, a question that will have been shared by many Methodists, to whom, as even Sangster recognised, it must have sounded ‘archaic.’ *Seek a City Saint* is an accessible book that takes the form of a series of letters to an imaginary ‘Joe,’ who has returned to the city after some years at sea and seeks to make sense of what it means to be ‘holy’ in a much-changed world. As the opening letter makes clear, Joe is struggling to reconcile the twin concepts of holiness and worldliness that his new world appears to demand:

Dear Joe,  
Holy worldliness! You have, you tell me, found those words walking arm in arm through the pages of a book or two you have picked up recently. I agree that you would not have expected them to enjoy one another’s company. As different as chalk and cheese... You tell me that your self-appointed discipline this Lent is to live in earshot of the discord of these two words, and that you would like me to produce the music.<sup>18</sup>

Joe’s respondent recognises and shares his dilemma, replying, ‘The more I try to get hold of holiness...the more a voice inside me shouts ‘Not for Me’, while another voice quietly insists, ‘Yes, all of it’.<sup>19</sup> The problem, it seems, lies in the word:

Let us be honest, and confess to revulsion. Holiness! The word oozes hallowed stuffiness and haloed hypocrisy. Stand up the business man, bus man, or busy shopper, who will confess in the middle of High Street or at the middle of his own privacy to a desire to be holy.<sup>20</sup>

And yet holiness cannot so easily be set aside. It is scriptural, as Joe is informed,

‘The difficulty is increased when we realize that whatsoever the words “holy” and “saints” – meaning “holy persons” – imply, they are used in Scripture not for the specially devout, or spiritually gifted, or exceptionally mature, but for the “ordinary Christian”; not for the blue-blooded holy Joe, but for every Tom, Dick, and Harry, Jane and Jennifer, who believes and is baptised.’<sup>21</sup>

This means, that in spite of its difficulties, holiness...

...or something with a strong dose of it, is the only Christian answer. We were called to this. This is that indispensable asset which alone makes it possible to “see the

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<sup>17</sup> David Head, *Seek a City Saint: Letters to Joe* (London: The Epworth Press, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p 6.

Lord". This is the single-minded life that goes with the many dimensional Kingdom of God. This is what the Holy Spirit is after.<sup>22</sup>

So what kind of holiness are we to envisage and to pursue? Here our respondent rejects those popular notions of holiness that imply separation from the world, an ideal character, a devotion solely to prayer and 'religious activities,' or those that project a false 'image' of our true selves. In their place Joe is advised to pursue a holiness that is fully immersed in the ordinary and everyday life of the world.<sup>23</sup> It is a holiness that we may recognize in others, but never in ourselves – that is the nature of it. In this way, our respondent agrees with Flew and Sangster that holiness is not something to which we are ever in a position to testify. Indeed, citing Kierkegaard's search for the 'knight of faith' ('city saint, to you, Joe'), he makes the point 'that you would not recognize the city saint if you found him,' so immersed is s/he in the life of the world.<sup>24</sup> It is such openness to the world that leads our respondent to point to the Taizé community as an example of contemporary holiness, fully engaged and to be found 'at the crossroads of the Church and the world.'<sup>25</sup> This is not a holiness inviting a 'grim determination' to be something that we are not, but rather one that is concerned with letting Christ work within us as we take our place in the world – it is holy 'worldliness'. Here is evidence that a major influence on Head's book is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose description of 'worldliness,' as set out in his letter of 21<sup>st</sup> August 1944, is offered to Joe as advice for holy living:

One must abandon every attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, a converted sinner, a churchman (the priestly type, so-called), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. This is what I mean by worldliness – taking life in one's stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experience and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly in the arms of God.<sup>26</sup>

What we have in *Seek a City Saint* is redolent of the times, as Head refuses to abandon holiness but instead reinterprets it, offering it afresh as a way of life for the late twentieth century. He does so in a way that is accessible and attractive, and the book will no doubt

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp 7-9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p 31.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p 104.

have made a positive impact on those Methodists who read it. There is, however, hardly a mention of Wesley and the historic holiness tradition, nor of the formational practices necessary for the nurture of city saints. It is as if Head cannot find the resources in Wesley that a contemporary reinterpretation demands – and yet the terminology of holiness itself remains important to him, as evidenced by the fact that each of the thirteen chapter-headings is prefaced by the adjective ‘holy.’ Yet, had he probed the tradition further, Head might have drawn upon John Wesley’s ‘worldliness,’ exhibited in his determination to engage with ordinary people, spend his time among them, and respond to their needs and concerns. It seems, however, that the tradition was too closely associated with an individualistic and other-worldly piety that it failed to inspire Head, leaving his imagination to be fired instead by the new currents in theology that were gaining traction, and which appeared to offer a vision of holiness that took account of the challenges of the time.

### **Tom Meadley: Top Level Talks<sup>27</sup>**

It is no surprise that a former Principal of Cliff College should seek to maintain a firm hold on the Wesleyan holiness tradition, as Tom Meadley does in his innovative book, *Top Level Talks: The Christian Summit Meeting – Studies in Scriptural Holiness or the Doctrine of Entire Sanctification*.<sup>28</sup> Altogether different from earlier treatments, Meadley’s creative exposition reflects the changed mood, language and realities of the 1960s. This is obvious from the title, evoking the ‘familiar...sight of massive power-blocs holding summit meetings and momentous top-level talks’ designed to maintain world peace, following Winston Churchill’s 1953 House of Commons speech and call for the same.<sup>29</sup> Like Head, Meadley is conscious that the terminology of ‘holiness, perfection, [and] sanctification’ is less appealing than in the past, and that what is needed is ‘evidence that Christianity really works out in practice in this world.’<sup>30</sup> To that end he affords us fly-on-the-wall entry into *Top Level Talks*. This is not a gathering of world or even Church leaders, but the definitive summit meeting, in which the Triune God considers the purposes, processes and accomplishment of God’s ultimate

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<sup>27</sup> T. D. Meadley, *Top Level Talks: The Christian Summit Meeting - Studies in Scriptural Holiness or the Doctrine of Entire Sanctification* (London: Epworth Press, 1969).

<sup>28</sup> Cliff College championed an interpretation of Wesleyan holiness that had developed under the influence of nineteenth-century holiness revivalism, focussing on the experiential and instantaneous reception of entire sanctification or the ‘Second Blessing.’

<sup>29</sup> Meadley, *Top Level Talks*, pp 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p 1.



project: humanity created, redeemed and sanctified, sharing in the holiness and righteousness of God.

Meadley develops his distinctive approach from the premise that 'God is the controller of the universe,' whose overarching purposes and activities are set forth in the Scriptures, where we are offered 'the fundamental diagnosis of the human situation' and glimpse the 'supreme discussions in celestial government circles, divine top level talks, the Christian summit meeting.'<sup>31</sup> From this perspective, Meadley articulates an understanding of Scriptural Holiness, not through detailed analysis of key texts as in previous approaches, but by engagement with the overall Biblical story of salvation:

To cut a long story short... the Bible is about shaping human beings, human society, and the total structure of reality itself, into the pattern and will of God. The Bible is essentially about action, ultimate and intimate, to this end. Both command, exhortation, and promise agree: 'Be ye holy, for I am holy' (Leviticus 9:2); 'Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48),<sup>32</sup>

The agenda before the summit is the means by which God's perfecting work can be realised 'against a background of imperfection and failure.'<sup>33</sup> Salvation is envisaged as 'a vast salvage operation' involving not only justification and new birth, but sanctification conceived as a process of 'decontamination, cleansing, setting apart for training, rehabilitation, and toughening up to achieve the maximum fitness' for God's service, as old habits are broken and new ones formed; or as the detergent adverts put it, 'To force the grey out we must force the white in.'<sup>34</sup> In this restatement, Meadley seems uninterested in the old debates about the eradication and destruction of sin, as he seeks to avoid any mechanical understanding of the Spirit's work. Instead, he comes closer to Wesley's habituated affectional approach,<sup>35</sup> stating that the 'divine purpose, pattern, power, and person...are meant to become second nature,' via the 'inner workings' of the heart, 'the spring of motive.'

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p 12.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp 20-22.

<sup>35</sup> For an account of Wesley's habituated affectional moral psychology see, Randy L. Maddox, "A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley's "Heart Religion"," in *"Heart Religion" in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard Steele (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001).

Purity of heart really means concentration of attention and resources on the supreme object of concern and commitment. Men see what they are interested in. The senses become attuned by desire, by training, by practice, to whatever dominates the life... The motive and the method of sanctification are here revealed in daily discipline.<sup>36</sup>

Meadley regards prayer as central to this daily discipline, as well as self-denial and taking up the cross:

The instinctive attitudes which revolve around self-interest...must be taught and conditioned all the time to lay down their lives in the interests of the Kingdom of God, and rise again to a different kind of life, still the same instincts but redirected and Christ-controlled.<sup>37</sup>

This reflects Wesley's understanding of 'the general means of grace,' where 'denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily' is a key practice.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Meadley follows Wesley in viewing the means of grace as essential to our formation, as in the case of Holy Communion, which 'incorporates the drama of Gospel redemption, and thereby helps to impress the pattern, impart the power, and further the purpose of the Triune God.'<sup>39</sup> Similarly, with worship, which exposes us 'to the pattern, the pressure, the power, the purpose' of God. And in the case of Christian fellowship, Meadley argues that 'the most intensive cultivation of fruit and flower is in the smaller pot,' highlighting the formational importance of Wesley's Class system, likening it to Jesus' choice of twelve disciples as well as to the 'social mechanism' of 'the Communist cell.'<sup>40</sup>

In his interpretation of what constitutes entire sanctification, particularly the term that became its hallmark, the Second Blessing, Meadley is more nuanced than his Cliff predecessors, reflecting the concern he expressed whilst Principal about its divisiveness and his consequent view that a restatement was 'one of the supreme challenges' the college faced.<sup>41</sup> Cautioning against a mechanical view, 'whereby God always operates a two-stage

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<sup>36</sup> Meadley, *Top Level Talks*, p 161.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 160-61.

<sup>38</sup> John Wesley, "The Bristol Conference of August 1-3, 1745" in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker et al., 35 projected vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984ff), [50], 10:155.

<sup>39</sup> *Top Level Talks*, p 171.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p 174.

<sup>41</sup> G. Howard Mellor, "The Development of Mission Theology and Praxis at Cliff College, with Reference to Its Antecedents and History" (University of Durham, 2005), p 100.

impartation of blessing, pulling first lever one and then lever two,' he nonetheless wants to hold on to its importance: 'The whole point of the teaching is that every Christian must face up to the challenge to complete surrender of self-will to the Divine Will, and the offer of supreme Divine assistance to this end.'<sup>42</sup> He likens it to that moment of illumination when the 'jig-saw appears complete' and we grasp all that God has done in Christ and the fullness of the offer we are invited to receive:

We can share the vision, the approach, the spirit, the means and methods, the motives and mission. This *is* sanctification, and to be totally devoted to this *is* entire sanctification.<sup>43</sup>

It is received 'by the same response of trust' that accompanied our entry into the Christian life, and there is 'no specified time-schedule or temperature-chart' that applies to all.<sup>44</sup> 'Maturity,' Meadley writes, 'is not only a gradual process but also may well include a short-term crisis of abandonment,' whose evasion would result in living below our potential and 'God's infinite promise.'<sup>45</sup>

This focus on God's promise and purpose, ensures that Meadley's restatement of Wesleyan holiness envisions not only the transformation of the individual but also of the world. Indeed, personal transformation is in the service of the Kingdom, or as we might now say, the *mission dei*: because, 'the God of the Bible is distinctively a saving God:'

To be holy is to be like Him... a saving person, or part of a saving community. Our sanctification is to this end, and expresses itself in this way. We become minor mediators, supplementary saviours, extensions of the atonement, crucified with Christ, risen with Him, filled with the Spirit, agents of the Kingdom of God, colonizers of heaven.<sup>46</sup>

Directing our attention to the 'energy of holy love' which Jesus 'incarnated and projected into the total situation of man' which 'is at once the sample and the source of entire sanctification,' Meadley concludes his spirited if rather quirky restatement of Wesleyan holiness with the invitation: 'Trust the Proper Man and his energetic victory at the Cross,

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<sup>42</sup> Meadley, *Top Level Talks*, p 34.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p 87.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p 88.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p 18.

and the new nature and the same divine energy flows through you as you are grappled to God in Christ in a united relationship.<sup>47</sup>

### **John Vincent: Christ and Methodism<sup>48</sup>**

Perhaps the most strident and challenging voice during the 1960s was John Vincent, a member of both the Fellowship of the Kingdom and the Renewal Group, who, in contrast to Meadley, dismissed Methodism's distinctive doctrines, including Christian perfection, as no longer relevant, arguing instead for a new focus on Christ as Lord and the call to radical discipleship. Well aware that he would 'upset a good many people,' Vincent's aim in *Christ and Methodism* was 'to give expression to a meaningful Christianity for the modern Methodist.'<sup>49</sup>

I believe that this is a decisive moment for Methodism, a moment which will be missed unless we are prepared to start living by faith, to stop living by the old slogans which wear increasingly thin, and start listening to some of the new deeds of the Spirit, and the new ideas abroad in the world and in thinking today.<sup>50</sup>

This reference to 'new deeds of the Spirit' is pivotal to Vincent's method and argument. He claims that far from rejecting Wesley, he is being true to him in seeking 'radical answers' to the same two questions that Wesley responded to in his day, namely, "'What is the Holy Spirit doing?'" and "'What does the New Testament say?'"<sup>51</sup>

For Vincent, it is clear that the Spirit is doing a new thing – leading God's people into the secular world in the service of the *Secular Christ* (the title of his 1967 study of Jesus in the Gospels).<sup>52</sup> It is self-evident also that the Spirit is no longer blessing the Methodist people with the experiences of the past:

Are these experiences as Wesley described them found in Methodism today? Are our Class Meetings, even when they meet, the weekly occasions of testimony to someone's attaining Perfect Love as a gift from God, experienced in the soul? Or do our people confess to unshakable Assurance that God has not only given them forgiveness but also continued 'acceptance as sons'? Now, I am not at the moment

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p 233.

<sup>48</sup> John J. Vincent, *Christ and Methodism: Towards a New Christianity for a New Age* (London: The Epworth Press, 1965).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp 2-3.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p 3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p 8.

<sup>52</sup> *Secular Christ: A Contemporary Interpretation of Jesus* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968).

questioning whether our people ought to feel these things, or whether they could be persuaded to expect to feel them. These are 'experiential' doctrines. And we no longer have those experiences. And, since the experience has gone, the doctrines ought to go as well.<sup>53</sup>

Vincent takes issue with Eric Baker's restatement of Christian Perfection in *The Faith of a Methodist*, which Vincent sees as a piece demythologization:

...if Perfection is only doing God's will of love in particular situations, particularly in love of our neighbour, then it is a momentary state, dependent not upon a state of piety but upon a specific deed of love, which makes us 'perfect in love' at that moment only. The 'demythologization' logically leads to this. It is not what Wesley meant, but it is exactly what non-Methodists mean by 'doing the will of God'.<sup>54</sup>

Whilst Vincent's reasoning is persuasive, he fails to take account of the development of holy character that can sustain a moment by moment loving response to God and neighbour, which is at the crux of Wesley's thought. Yet, it is on this flawed basis that Vincent dismisses Wesley's *grand depositum*, arguing that,

We neither expect nor want 'Second Blessings' or 'Entire Sanctification', and we are not noticeably holy. I suggest therefore that we forget about our 'distinctive emphasis upon Holiness', lest some of our friends in other Communion, who are doing their best to understand us and even like us, call our bluff and discover that we are simply being dishonest.<sup>55</sup>

With this statement Vincent draws a line between the present and the past. In his view, 'However much some of us talk about "reclaiming our inheritance", the real position is that that inheritance no longer describes where our people are or where they want to be.'<sup>56</sup> Wesley's quest was an experiential one, giving rise to experiential doctrines, such as Assurance and Christian Perfection, but 'For a variety of reasons – philosophical, psychological, theological – the 'experiential' line to *certainty* is now closed to us. Only One Authority remains: Jesus Christ.'<sup>57</sup> Faith in Christ is what matters. And this faith, according to Vincent's understanding of the New Testament, 'is not intellectual assent,' nor "an inner conviction of the heart", as Wesley taught. Rather, it is the practical and existential committing oneself to Christ in a concrete and real deed.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Christ and Methodism: Towards a New Christianity for a New Age*, p 46.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p 44.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p 45.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p 47.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p 20.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p 33.

Do we not know that we are never 'Christian' as a settled possession, but only in so far as and when and where we *do* something in thought, word or deed, which can be taken up by Christ into His Way, which belongs to His Kingdom? In other words, does not Discipleship more accurately describe our Christian life than the old evangelical salvation-scheme terms like justification, assurance and perfection?'<sup>59</sup>

With his emphasis on faith in action as the true measure of Christian life, Vincent is reminiscent of Phoebe Palmer, who bypassed experience with her shorter way, and emphasis on 'naked faith.'<sup>60</sup> But unlike Palmer, Vincent leaves the Wesleyan tradition and the pursuit of holiness behind in order to follow Christ into the secular world in response to the call to radical discipleship. Vincent calls for incarnational mission, appealing to middle-class Methodists to discover what it means to be 'a church for Coronation Street,' injected with 'a sense of discipline, discipleship, adventure and hope.'<sup>61</sup>

What is needed today is a vast number of committed men and women who will be put at the service of the Church to serve in the myriad ministries which Christ seeks to perform and which the modern world opens up to us in disarming multiplicity. The Christian is the 'Christ man' in the midst of a world in need.<sup>62</sup>

Following Bonhoeffer, the Christian life is one of immersion in the world, and though he will not say it, this is what constitutes Vincent's vision of the Christ-like life, the life that is lived in response to the call to radical discipleship, or as we might say, the holy life.

'The genius of Methodism,' Vincent concludes, 'was that, two hundred years ago, she listened to what the Spirit was doing in the lives of people and made a theology out of it.'<sup>63</sup>

Such listening to the Spirit is urgently required again but Vincent is concerned that the voice of the Spirit will struggle to gain a hearing:

The Methodism striving to be born could be stillborn through prejudice, conservatism and complacency. It could be stillborn through a wholly natural unwillingness to listen to a new generation – a generation which loyally does its best to 'preach our doctrines', does its whack of 'evangelistic missions', and 'keeps our disciplines', but which knows in its heart that all these things stand under question from modern man, from the modern world, from the modern Church, and from the contemporary Christ.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp 65-66.

<sup>60</sup> For an account of Palmer's understanding of holiness see, Elaine A. Heath, "The Quest for Holiness," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. William Abraham and James E. Kirby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Vincent, *Christ and Methodism: Towards a New Christianity for a New Age*, pp 98-100.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p 103.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p 120.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp 120-21.

Vincent, with his theological and Biblical expertise, gifts of communication, and passion advocacy went on to put many of his proposals into practice at the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield which he established in 1972 as an ecumenical centre of practical study and research with an emphasis on radical Christianity.<sup>65</sup> He was and would remain an important, challenging, controversial and influential voice within Methodism, articulating a form of discipleship that would continue to inspire and shape the Christian formation of those of a radical disposition within the Methodist Church and as a reminder to the rest of Methodism of the needs of the poor and marginalised.

## Conclusion

Head, Meadley, and Vincent present three very different responses to the relevance of Wesleyan holiness in the 1960s. Whilst it is not possible to give a definitive assessment of their respective influences at the time, we can draw some conclusions from the way they approached their work. All three offer something fresh and new, as if they realised that this was what was demanded, because the old interpretations of holiness will no longer do. This is true even of Meadley, who, with his Cliff College background, is determined to hold on to the tradition. There is also a problem with the language of holiness – for Vincent it has to be jettisoned entirely because he can no longer account for its content, whilst both Head and Meadley acknowledge that it is a serious barrier to be overcome. It seems clear that many people viewed holiness as ‘yesterday’s stuff,’ evoking an individualistic ‘holier-than-thou’ piety that no longer answered contemporary concerns. Even within the Church, the focus had shifted. The world was now writing the agenda, and holiness was not on it. Bonhoeffer’s Jesus, ‘the man for others,’ seemed to fit the spirit of the age. Holiness had an ‘other-worldly’ air about it that seemed to separate it from the realities of everyday life. What was needed was an authentic and practical Christian response. In their different ways, Head, Meadley, and Vincent all sought to provide it, with a shared concern for the world. For Head it was ‘holy worldliness,’ for Meadley, devotion to God’s purposes in the world, and for Vincent, ‘radical discipleship.’ Their respective books alerted Methodists to the fact that their world had changed, if they hadn’t already got the message. Of the three, only Meadley sought to reinterpret Wesleyan holiness, whilst both Head and Vincent drew

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<sup>65</sup> "Information," Urban Theology Unit, <http://www.utusheffield.org.uk/> accessed 15 November 2012.

their inspiration from new currents in theology and New Testament studies. It is hard to gauge the full impact of their writings, amidst all the other pressures and influences of the decade, other than to suggest that whilst Meadley's book is likely to have appealed to a narrower audience than Head's more accessible Lent study, Vincent's forthright views could not fail to attract attention and enliven debate, agree with him or not.

In the end, the writing was on the wall. Methodists were beginning to look in new directions, rather than to Wesley, who seemed out of step with the modern world with which they were grappling. Judged against Rupert Davies' benchmark that the post-war period 'be viewed as attempts, some successful and some not, to weave again the fabric of Church life and thought, with a proper sense of continuity with the past, but with an equal sense of the newness and urgency of the modern situation,' the efforts in respect of the holiness tradition must be reckoned as unsuccessful.<sup>66</sup> The terminology of 'holiness' had become problematic, and even Head and Meadley's attempts to rescue it proved doomed to failure as it began to disappear from Methodist discourse. Vincent's claim that Methodists no longer have the distinctive experiences of their forbears, such as 'entire sanctification' and 'Second Blessing' will have resonated with many, who will have shared his view that the emphasis on holiness should be abandoned. But perhaps Vincent and others failed to grasp the dynamic of the tradition sufficiently, unable to see that at its heart Wesleyan holiness is rooted in a devotion and desire for that unbroken communion with God that gives rise to a Christ-like love and service of God and neighbour – especially of those who need us most – whose outcome is both personal and societal transformation. You could say, that in their shared passion for a deeper engagement with the world, Meadley, Head, and even Vincent exhibited, in their different ways, the single-minded devotion that was itself a mark of Wesleyan holiness, as they encouraged their readers to serve their communities and world more perfectly in that decade we now call, 'The Sixties'. As such it is a pointer to the potential that the tradition may still hold to unite a diverse and weakened Methodist Church around its founding identity, and to nurture a new generation of 'saints' in Christ-like living. Wesleyan holiness is a lost tradition ripe for re-expression.

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<sup>66</sup> Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism*, 3rd ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1985), pp 162-63.



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