SANCTIFICATION AS LIVED BY EARLY METHODIST WOMEN

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In addition to being a close friend and correspondent of John Wesley, Hester Ann Rogers was noted for her life of prayer and holiness. The following excerpt from a meditation in her diary serves not only to illustrate the spirituality of early Methodist women, but also provides the simple outline for a discussion of sanctification as they lived it.

O how precious are Jesus' ways to my soul,
   suited to my weakness,
   worthy of a God!
   I am nothing! He is all!
I live moment by moment upon his smiles,
   and desire nothing but to please him:
To grow in inward conformity to his will,
   and sink deeper into humble love;
   to let the light
of what his grace hath bestowed,
   shine on all around,
   and to live and die proclaiming,
GOD IS LOVE!²

This reflective meditation is profound and engaging. Hester’s prayer reveals the heart of Methodist praxis. Here we can see clearly how doctrine was translated into action by the early followers of Wesley. What the Methodist women believed, they lived. What they lived, shaped, in large measure, the belief of the people called Methodist. I would like

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¹Hester, born on January 31, 1756, was the only daughter of the Rev. James Roe of Macclesfield. In 1784 she married James Rogers, one of Wesley's preachers. She kept a diary from the time of becoming a Methodist and engaged in extensive correspondence about religious matters, including the doctrine of sanctification. Her Experience (1793), an autobiographical account drawn from her diary, and her Spiritual Letters (1796) were combined with her Funeral Sermon by Thomas Coke (1795) and an appendix prepared by her husband to form a volume entitled The Experience and Spiritual Letters of Mrs. Hester Ann Rogers. This work was extremely popular among Methodist women for over a century and went through many reprintings under several titles on both sides of the Atlantic. She was often pointed to as an example of holy living in the Methodist tradition. Cf., Paul W. Chilcote, “John Wesley as Revealed by the Journal of Hester Ann Rogers,” Methodist History 20, 3 (April 1982), 111-23.
Hester’s prayer, therefore, to become an act of worship, something of a litany, punctuating the salient features of sanctification as lived by the women of early Methodism.

The all-sufficiency of God’s grace

To turn now, more directly, to the issue of sanctification as lived by Methodist women, Hester’s prayer begins: “O how precious are Jesus’ ways to my soul, suited to my weakness, worthy of a God! I am nothing! He is all!” Here, she gives expression to a pervasive theme of the journals, letters, and memoirs of Methodist women, and to the first of five aspects of sanctification, namely, the all-sufficiency of God’s grace. Wesleyan soteriology, as has been widely noted, is rooted in grace. When Wesley defined “grace” in his Instructions for Children, he simply described it as “the power of the Holy Spirit, enabling us to believe and love and serve God.”

Sanctification, therefore, is nothing other than the fruition of God’s gracious activity in our lives, empowering us to believe, love, and serve “to the uttermost,” an expression often used by the women. This is why Wesley, when pressed to articulate what he meant by “Christian perfection,” simply referred time and time again to the “great commandment” of Jesus. It means, he would say, “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, ... and to love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:29–31). Here is the essence of religion, the heart of the Christian faith. This act of loving God and neighbor, in Wesley’s view and that of his women followers, must always be understood in the Johannine sense of reciprocal love (“We love because He first loved us” [1 John 4:19].) The responsive nature of our love, moreover, reflects the great “paradox of grace” articulated by St. Paul in his confession: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). And so, Hester cries out, “I am nothing! He is all!” The end of faith, as well as its beginning, is true self knowledge, humility, and absolute trust in God. Christian discipleship—the arena of God’s sanctifying activity in the life of the believer—is, first and foremost, a grace-filled response to God’s all-sufficient grace.

We are often impressed by the constant reference to total dependence upon God in the women’s effort to articulate their experience of salvation, and sanctification in particular. Ann Gilbert expressed her experience in these terms:

My soul is humbled to the dust at the feet of the Lord, and I am as a little child on its mother’s breast, always depending on the bounty of Heaven. I live but a moment

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3One of Wesley’s few catechetical publications, this small tract was a revised English “extract” from an early 18th century French work by the prominent mystic, disciple, and biographer of Antoinette Bourignon, Pierre Poiret, entitled Les Principes solides de la Religion et de la Vie Chretienne (1705). In Wesley’s Works, it appears with the altered title, Instructions for Children.
at a time, and that moment,—for eternity... I never wanted Christ more than I do now. My strength is perfect weakness.4

In their experience of this great paradox of grace, self-emptying, rather than leaving the believer with a hollow sense of loss, simply paved the way to God's filling. In one of her many letters to John Wesley touching upon the issue of sanctification and perfect love, Sarah Crosby observed:

I find a Rest in the centre of my soul, which noting doth, or can, interrupt. I feel no Pride, no Anger, no Unbelief, no desire of anything evil. I have but one desire which nothing can satisfy, but the full fruition of God. And what kind of rest this gives, they only that find it know. The light of faith shines clear; the love of God does melt and meeken [sic] my soul, and reduces me to nothing: so that I live not, but Christ liveth in me. I know not that I need anything more, but to increase herein.5

The acclamation, "He is all!" immediately springs from the confession, "I am nothing." Following a description of the fallen nature of humanity which she compares to the setting of the sun, Bathsheba Hall, therefore, immediately interjects, "[But] the face of creation animates my soul. When we have God we have every thing! As the natural sun cheers the drooping plants, so do thy beams gladden my every power."6 All of this in the midst of a protracted discussion of holiness.

Perhaps no early Methodist woman was more widely acclaimed for her proclamation of grace than Grace Murray, the major prototype for female leadership within the movement. At the end of her life and many years of faithful service to the Methodist cause, she left this dying testimony:

I would have no encomiums passed on me; I AM A SINNER, SAVED FREELY BY GRACE: Grace, divine grace, is worthy to have all the glory. Some people I have heard speak much of our being faithful to the grace of God; as if they rested much on their own faithfulness: I never could bear this; it is GOD'S FAITHFULNESS to his own word of promise, that is my only security for salvation.7

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6"An Extract from the Diary of Mrs. Bathsheba Hall," Arminian Magazine 4 (1781), 95.
7William Bennet, Memoirs of Mrs. Grace Bennet (Macclesfield: Printed and sold by E. Bayley, 1803), 83. A Methodist from the outset of the revival, Grace served as a band leader at the Foundery in London, as housekeeper of Wesley's Orphan House headquarters in the north, and as Wesley's traveling companion throughout England and Ireland. Betrothed to John Wesley by a contract de praesenti, brother Charles intervened, hastily arranging the marriage of Grace to one of Wesley's preachers, John Bennet. In spite of the fact that the various parties were reconciled in the end, Bennet left Wesleyan Methodism for Calvinism, and Grace found her new role in the Warburton Church, conducting weekly prayer meetings and...
Maturity in Christ—the whole purpose of sanctifying grace in the Wesleyan understanding—was as much a gift of God's grace as everything else in the life of the believer.

**O HOW PRECIOUS ARE JESUS' WAYS TO MY SOUL, SUITED TO MY WEAKNESS, WORTHY OF A GOD! I AM NOTHING! HE IS ALL!**

**The goal of happiness in Christ**

Hannah Ball, a leading member of the Methodist Society in High Wycombe, was the pioneer of Sunday Schools in England, long before Robert Raikes (who got the credit) had even conceived of his experiments in Gloucester. The connection which she drew between God's grace and human happiness provides an appropriate bridge to the second facet of sanctification, the goal of happiness in Christ. “There is no state of life but needs much grace, and no real happiness but what comes from God,” she wrote. “One day, meditating on what would constitute a person’s happiness that had escaped the incidental allurements of youth, it was powerfully applied to my mind, ‘The grace of God, and nothing else.’ I have ever found it true.” In his sermon, “The Righteousness of Faith,” in which Wesley rang the changes on “God’s mercy freely given,” he also boldly proclaimed: “Now the best end which any creature can pursue is happiness in God.”

In Albert Outler’s classic little book, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, one passage, perhaps more than any other, first grasped my attention and continues to allure: “This man was a eudaemonist, convinced and consistent all his life. All his emphases on duty and discipline are auxiliary to his main concern for human happiness (blessedness, etc.).”


In fact, she founded a Sunday School in 1769 for the teaching of Scripture, reading, and other elementary subjects to neglected children, eleven years prior to the similar experiment of Raikes in his own parish in 1780. She met the children on Sundays and Mondays. See the account of her life and work based on her journals and correspondence, originally published in 1796 with many subsequent editions and reprintings; Joseph Cole, ed., *Memorials of Hannah Ball*, 3rd ed., (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1880).

Cole, *Hannah Ball*, 118.


11 Albert Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), 81. He goes on to say that Wesley “believed (with Aquinas, Erasmus, and Richard Lucas before him) that all our truly human aspirations are oriented toward happiness.” Perhaps I should draw an interesting connection with Francis here as well. I am reminded of a noteworthy passage in Sabatier’s classic biography: “Francis not merely could not endure these grimaces of false piety, he actually counted mirth and joy in the number of religious duties...” The word
We should not be surprised, therefore, by Hester's serendipitous phrase: "I live moment by moment upon his smiles, and desire nothing but to please him." In spite of the controversy that continually surrounded Wesley's doctrine, I believe (with Outler) that his concept of "going on to perfection" had a consistent character and a clear end in view. Radical trust in the sufficiency of God's grace leads to love, both of God and neighbor, and to a quality of happiness in life that can only be attributed to the indwelling of the Spirit in the life of the believer. "To live joyously in the Spirit" is, perhaps, the simplest and best definition of "holiness." And it is not a monumental leap from this realization to the observation that a happy faith is a faith that sings. Let it not be forgotten that it was through the hymns of the Methodist tradition, the major collection of which Wesley described as "A Little Body of Experimental Divinity," that the singers were exposed to this contagious form of a happy faith. Methodism was born in song.

Perhaps the interesting expression concerning the "smiles of Jesus" in Hester's meditation was drawn from many similar allusions in the hymns of Charles Wesley. In one of Charles' hymns for his bride (a hymn in which we would hope to find a smiling faith), we find these pertinent lines:

Come let us arise,  
And press to the skies;  
The summons obey,  
My friends, my beloved, and hasten away!  
The Master doth call,  
And deigns to approve  
With smiles of acceptance our labour of love.\(^\text{13}\)

Of even greater interest for my purposes here is the Wesleys' exchange of the word "holiness" for "happiness" in a number of the hymns.\(^\text{14}\) For the Wesley brothers and their early Methodist followers, the words were simply interchangeable; "holiness is happiness."\(^\text{15}\) Overwhelmed, on one
occasion, by her reflections upon the “consolations of the Spirit” and the
“blessed way of holiness,” Isabella Wilson proclaimed in wonder:

This is love unspeakable! His delight is to make us happy. O how does his love exceed all that fancy can form, or imagination paint. The favoured soul is ready to say, I have heard great and glorious things spoken of thee, but, oh, how little was said to what I find! O how unable are the tongues of mortals to set forth the pleasures of those who are united to this Jesus! We joy in his redeeming love. He is most precious, and altogether lovely.16

While their happiness was contagious, it had to be defended from time to time, perhaps the greatest testimony to the reality of the experience itself. The transparent happiness of Hester Rogers troubled a Calvinist friend who thought it not proper for a Christian to appear so full of joy.17 Her happiness even drew a flurry of questions from her brother who was studying for the Anglican priesthood at Oxford at the time:

Are you really possessed of the happiness you speak of? . . . Are you not deceived? Convince me that you are not. . . . If it is real how did you attain it? . . . I would give up all the World to obtain the favor with God you speak of, but I know not which way to attain it.18

For the early Methodist women, “holiness is happiness.” The life of holiness which they affirmed was life with a smile on its face, abundant life in Christ.

I LIVE MOMENT BY MOMENT UPON HIS SMILES,
AND DESIRE NOTHING BUT TO PLEASE HIM.

The necessity of growth into deeper love: inward holiness

Hardly a word in Hester’s next statement is without significance, as we turn our attention, thirdly, to the necessity of growth into deeper love,
inward holiness as a critical component of the evangelical piety of early Methodist women. "I desire," she wrote, "to grow in inward conformity to his will, and sink deeper into humble love." Another classic statement of Albert Outler provides some guidance here. "The gospel is God's enacted promise in Christ," he wrote, "that we can live intentionally, following the inner leadings of the Holy Spirit, obedient to what we are given to know of God's will, growing ever into a deeper faith and a truer happiness than we could ever know, in and for and by ourselves." The Wesleys always seemed to prefer the dynamic, biological, therapeutic images of new birth, growth, and recovery to the static, albeit biblical/traditional images of acquittal, imputation, and satisfaction.

Wesley found opportunity to speak at length about the necessity and reality of a relative change in one's forensic status before God. But this experience of justification by grace through faith was, for him, a means to the greater end of a real change, a regenerative act, the beginning of a process of recovery that restored the image of God in the heart of the believer. "Ye know that the great end of religion," he would repeat on a number of occasions, "is to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained by the sin of our first parents." Wesley discovered, in the richness of Methodist religious experience, and particularly the experience of women, a spiritual development that was analogous to birth, growth, and ultimate maturity. "Perfect love," therefore, is the goal toward which the spiritual therapy of sanctifying grace must ever be directed.

Sarah Ryan, Wesley's faithful correspondent, had a vision one day of such growth and seized upon it as the directing principle of her life:

[On Sunday] in Spitalfields Church, I saw the Lord Jesus standing, and a little child all in white before him: and he shewed me, he had made me as that child; but that I should grow up to the measure of his full stature. I came home full of light, joy, love, and holiness; and God daily confirmed what he had done for my soul. And, blessed be his name! I now know where my strength lieth, and my soul is continually sinking more and more into God.21

19 Outler, Theology, 62-63.
20 Wesley's sermon on "Original Sin" (III.5), Wesley, Works, 2:185. The quotation continues: "Ye know that all religion which does not answer this end, all that stops short of this, the renewal of our soul in the image of God, after the likeness of him that created it, is no other than a poor farce and a mere mockery of God, to the destruction of our own soul. O beware of all those teachers of lies who would palm this upon you for Christianity! . . . Keep to the plain, old 'faith, once delivered to the saints', and delivered by the Spirit of God to your hearts. Know your disease! Know your cure! . . . Now 'go on' 'from faith to faith', until your whole sickness be healed, and all that 'mind be in you which was also in Christ!'" Cf., Sermons 12. "The Witness of Our Own Spirit;" 45, "The New Birth;" 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation;" and 129, "Heavenly Treasures in Earthen Vessels." Outler has described the "recovery of the defaced image of God" as the "axial theme of Wesley's soteriology."
Perhaps the most critical question, as David Watson has pointed out, is "how to permit God's grace to foster a maturity of constant obedience, so that sanctifying grace might work with an unimpeded love." In essence, the early Methodist women "sank deeper into humble love" by *immersing* themselves in the classic means of grace that were so central to the movement as a whole, what Wesley described simply as "works of piety." These "means" not only nurtured and sustained their growth in grace, but also provided the "energy" which fueled the movement as a powerful religious awakening. The emphasis which they placed upon mutual accountability and the strength drawn from intimate fellowship, their celebration of classic spiritual disciplines as important means of growth (as well as conversion), and their renewed interest in the sacramental life of the church were all part and parcel of growth in inward holiness.

In a journal entry of February 18, 1775, Hannah Ball, in characteristic Wesleyan fashion, provides an outline of those means of grace she had found most helpful to her spiritual growth:

> I have received, I trust, an increase of patience: my soul rests in God. To the end that I may improve in the knowledge of Him, I read, write, and pray; hear the word preached; converse with the people of God; fast, or use abstinence; together with every prudential help, as channels only, for receiving the grace of God; but private prayer is in general the most strengthening means of all.

There is no question that the class and band meetings, the marks of *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, were potent cells for the promotion of inward holiness or love of God. In the intimacy of these small groups, and particularly the bands, women learned what it meant to grow in Christ and, together,  

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23 Cole, *Hannah Ball*, 97–98. In a letter to William Law, dated January 6, 1756, Wesley argued that "All the externals of religion are in order to the renewal of our soul in righteousness and true holiness. But it is not true that the external way is one and the internal way another. There is but one scriptural way wherein we receive inward grace—through the outward means which God hath appointed." In general, for Wesley there are five chief means of grace: 1) prayer, 2) the Word (read, preached, and meditated upon), 3) fasting, 4) Christian conference (or what we would call "fellowship" or "religious conversation"), and 5) the Lord's Supper. Through these means, as Wesley taught, God gives and preserves a life of faith and holiness. See the concise discussion of this topic in Paul W. Chilcote, *Wesley Speaks on Christian Vocation* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1986), 33–48, which includes a modernized extract of Wesley's sermon, "The Means of Grace." It is noteworthy that, during the so-called "Stillness Controversy" in 1741, when Wesley encountered criticism from Moravian colleagues because of his emphasis upon the "means of grace," it was a woman, Jane Muncy, who came to his strong defense. In his *Journal* he records: "She was [in] one of the first women['s] bands at Fetter Lane, and when the controversy concerning the means of grace began, stood in the gap and contended earnestly for the ordinances once delivered to the saints. . . . From the time that she was made leader of one or two bands she was more eminently a pattern to the flock: in self-denial of every kind, in openness of behaviour, in simplicity and godly sincerity, in steadfast faith, in constant attendance on all the public and private ordinances of God." (Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 19, *Journals and Diaries*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, 206–7).
plumbed the depths of God's love for them all. Experiences in these groups often elicited the most eloquent testimonies of inward holiness, such as this statement of Isabella Wilson:

All glory be to God for persevering grace and more conformity to him in all things. Oh! the unbounded love of Jesus to my soul. His promises are all precious. My peace flows as a river while he teaches me the lessons of his grace, of faith and holiness. My soul is athirst for all the mind that was in him. 24

No means of grace, however, was as important to the Wesleys as the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The early Methodists sang, and the women bore witness to the testimony of the hymn:

The prayer, the fast, the word conveys,  
When mix'd with faith, Thy life to me;  
In all the channels of Thy grace  
I still have fellowship with Thee:  
But chiefly here my soul is fed  
With fulness of immortal bread. 25

These "feasts of love," as the women often described them, shaped their understanding of God's love for them and their reciprocal love for God—the source of "inward holiness" in their lives. This holiness was, in essence, founded upon a sense of communion with God through Christ, an abiding in Christ realized most fully in the context of a meal:

I have been favoured this day with the means of grace, which were feasts of love to my soul. I have fed at the table of the Lord on rich grace with thanksgiving. Oh that I may be more united to Jesus, that I may see him in all things who is altogether lovely. 26

Inward holiness, the necessity of growth into deeper levels of love for God, often came to fruition in the lives of the women as they remained faithful to these means of grace.

I DESIRE TO GROW IN INWARD CONFORMITY TO HIS WILL, AND SINK DEEPER INTO HUMBLE LOVE.

The witness of loving service to others: outward holiness

Charles Wesley's hymn, "Come let us arise," quoted above for its smiles, describes the life of holiness in subsequent verses, drawing heavily upon the images of Matthew 25:

24 Pipe, "Isabella Wilson," 564.
26 Pipe, "Isabella Wilson," 564.
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His burden who bear,
We alone can declare
How easy his yoke:
While to love and good works we each other provoke,
By word and by deed,
The bodies in need,
The souls to relieve,
And freely as Jesus hath given to give.

Then let us attend
Our heavenly friend
In his members distressed,
By want, or affliction, or sickness oppressed;
The prisoner relieve,
The stranger receive,
Supply all their wants,
And spend and be spent in assisting his saints.  

For the women, holiness was essentially a practical matter. If in their articulation of the doctrine of sanctification they leaned heavily in the direction of mystical language, their mysticism was invariably a "practical mysticism." Works of piety found ultimate expression in works of mercy. So Hester prays: "I desire to let the light of what his grace hath bestowed, shine on all around;" and this meant loving service to others, an outward holiness reflecting the love of God within.

Certainly, the Methodist women "offered the Christ" whom they had come to love and know in a variety of ways. They sought out people in need—the poor, the hungry, the destitute and the neglected. They preached the word, visited prisons, established orphanages and schools, and practiced their servant-oriented faith as devoted mothers who discerned the presence of God in the most menial of chores. Hardly passive Christians for whom ministry was performed, these women were active; ministering servants who cared for one another and extended their ministry into the communities they served. The prison ministry of Sarah Peters, known to all in her day through the publications of John Wesley, is exemplary. This is the same woman who often said, "I must be always moving. I cannot rest, day or night."  

28An analysis of the many activities of women directed toward the needs of others is provided in Paul W. Chilcote, She Offered Them Christ (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), passim; cf., Brown, Women of Methodism, 50-74 in particular.
In a letter of May 8, 1774, Wesley admonished Elizabeth Ritchie, one of his most trusted friends, to a ministry like his own:

I am not content that you should be pinned down to any one place. That is not your calling. Methinks I want you to be (like me) here and there and everywhere. Oh what a deal of work has our Lord to do on the earth! And may we be workers together with him!

And here, there, and everywhere they were. A glimpse into the diary of Sarah Crosby, the first woman preacher of Methodism, reveals the extent of her manifold activities during the year 1777:

Thou hast enabled me, from the first of last January to the fourth of this month (December), to ride 960 miles, to keep 220 public meetings, at many of which some hundreds of precious souls were present, about 600 private meetings, and to write an 116 letters, many of them long ones; besides many, many conversations with souls in private, the effect of which will, I trust, be "as bread cast on the waters." All glory be unto him, who has strengthened his poor worm.

Contented to live a somewhat more settled existence, Hannah Ball was no less indefatigable in her efforts to extend her love to others. Nearly one year into her Sunday School experiment in High Wycombe, she recorded the following resolution in her diary:

I desire to spend the remaining part of my life in a closer walking with God, and in labours of love to my fellow-creatures,—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, instructing a few of the rising generation in the principles of religion, and, in every possible way I am capable, ministering to them that shall be heirs of salvation.

31 "An Account of Mrs. Crosby, of Leeds," Methodist Magazine 29 (1806): 567. Cf. Chilcote, John Wesley, 53. In her journal, Mrs. Holder, who often assisted her itinerant husband by exhorting after he had preached, describes Sarah's excursions throughout North Yorkshire: "After some months Mrs. Crosby came again to Scarborough, and Miss Hurrel came with her; and they were the means of many flocking to the house of God. Their labours publicly and privately were blest to town and country to numbers of precious souls. Mrs. Crosby continued to come to Whitby several times for some years. She stayed with us in my father's house many weeks, and was a pattern of holiness in all manner of conversation. Her life and labours of love were of great use to many a soul, and I bless God that I ever saw her . . . her advice, reproof, instruction, and example were rendered exceedingly useful." [Zechariah Taft, Biographical Sketches of the Lives and Public Ministry of Various Holy Women, 2 vols. (London: Kerhaw, 1825 and Leeds: Cullingworth, 1828), 1:104]. Leslie Church, in his description of the ministry of Elizabeth Collet (based upon her son's account), notes the amazing dexterity which characterized her life: "She combined the work of a mother and housewife with that of a preacher. She had eleven children seven of whom survived her. Forty years of happy, married life, in a home which was a model, gave answer to the critics who said a woman's place was her home. . . . It is because she proved that a woman may perform most important public functions and yet remain devoted to her home that she is important to any survey of Methodist preaching" [Leslie Church, More about the Early Methodist People (London: Epworth Press, 1949), 159].
32 Cole, Hannah Ball, 57. Entry dated June 3, 1770.
The advice of Wesley to a Methodist woman aspiring to “perfection” is a typical expression of his gospel to the poor: “Go and see the poor and sick in their own little hovels. Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off the gentlewoman: You bear a higher character.”33

No example of outward holiness, as the fruit of faith in loving service to others, is more compelling than the celebrated life of Mary Bosanquet.34

As a young convert to Methodism who had renounced the wealth and privilege of her early life, Mary committed herself to a well conceived plan of ministry and service. On March 24, 1763, Mary and her dear friend, Sarah Ryan, moved to Leytonstone in order to establish an orphanage and school on the basis of Wesley’s own prototype at Kingswood. Wesley kept this model Christian community, which combined vibrant personal piety and active social service, under his personal surveillance, and on December 1, 1764, expressed his optimism and great expectations concerning its progress: “M[ary] B[osanquet] gave me a farther account of their affairs at Leytonstone. It is exactly Pietas Hallensis in miniature. What will be does not yet appear.”35

After much deliberation, the women determined to take in none but the most destitute and friendless. They formed themselves into a tightly knit community, adopted a uniform dress of dark purple cotton, and ate together at a table five yards long. Over the course of five years they sheltered and cared for thirty-five children and thirty-four adults. Through their efforts, what might have become an elegant home “became a school, an orphanage, a hospital and a kind of beguinage for poor widows.”36


34The standard biographical account of this noted philanthropist, preacher, and diarist, is that of Henry Moore, The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher, 6th ed. (London: J. Kershaw, 1824), which, like the Experience of Hester Rogers went through many editions and reprintings into the twentieth century. Perhaps no life was as well known to the women of early Methodism than that of Mary. A number of her publications, including A Letter to the Rev. John Wesley (1764), her able defense of women’s preaching; Jesus, Altogether Lovely (1766); An Aunt’s Advice to Her Niece (1780); Thoughts on Communion with Happy Spirits, an articulation of her understanding of the communion of the saints following the untimely death of her husband; and her Account of Sarah Lawrence were widely circulated and extremely influential both during and after her lifetime.


36Church, More About Methodist People 189. Like the Beguines, founded in the 12th century in the Netherlands, this sisterhood was committed to a semi-religious and somewhat austere communal life without vows. Similarly, their primary aim was the combination of religious
In later years, other circles of like-minded women, many of them preachers, formed around Mary Bosanquet. After her marriage to John Fletcher, these women took up residence in Leeds and formed themselves into a strong and influential band of women preachers known, with unconscious humor, as the “Female Brethren.”

Perhaps the statement of one of these preachers, Elizabeth Dickinson, whose motto was “holiness to the Lord,” most simply expresses the tradition of outward holiness that the women represented: “We must not only preach the gospel, but live the gospel, or we shall do more harm than good.”

I DESIRE TO LET THE LIGHT OF WHAT HIS GRACE HATH BESTOWED, SHINE ON ALL AROUND.

The proclamation of God’s love

Hester concluded her meditation with the most simple, the most profound affirmation, “I desire to live and die proclaiming, GOD IS LOVE.” This was the message of the early Methodist women as they lived it out in their lives. Here we come full circle to where we began. The foundation of their praxis of sanctification was a profound optimism in God’s grace linked with holiness of heart and life. For the women, holiness meant offering signposts for the pilgrim journey to those who were lost. It meant proclaiming a message of hope, through word and deed, to those considered to be the least among them. It meant living in and for a new order in God’s love that elevated those who came last. This was an understanding of sanctification rooted in the all-sufficiency of God’s grace, the goal of which was happiness in Christ. It was a view of Christian maturity that equally stressed the need of inward holiness, or love of God, and outward holiness, or love of neighbor. And so the necessity of growth into deeper levels of love could never be separated from the mandate to bear witness to that love in service to the world.

No woman of early Methodism, I believe, more fully embodied this Wesleyan principle of faith working by love leading to holiness of heart and life than Mary Fletcher. Her life’s sermon was a message of urgency, of renewal, and of love. On one occasion late in her life when she was unable to fulfill a preaching obligation due to an illness, she summed up contemplation and service to the sick and needy. See E. W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick, 1954). A comparative study of these semimonastic women’s groups within Methodism and the Beguines, in the plans of the author, will reveal some interesting and instructive parallels.


38 Quoted by Zechariah Taft in “Some Account of Elizabeth Dickinson,” in William Bramwell,
A Short Account of the Life and Death of Ann Culler (York: Printed by John Hill, 1827), 32.

her evangel—her call to scriptural holiness—in a brief letter to be read in her absence at the meeting of the Society:

O that you would therefore do as Jacob did, he earnest with the Lord, that his love may fill your heart, as the Scripture expresses it, the love of God, shed abroad in your hearts by the Holy Ghost, given unto you. If you get your hearts full of the love of God, you will find that is the oil by which the lamp of faith will be ever kept burning; love makes all our duty easy; a soul united as one spirit to the Lord if temptation presents, has a ready answer; such a one instantly cries out, How shall I do this great wickedness, and sin against God? against Him in whom my soul delighteth? Pray, my friends, pray much for this love; and remember that word, “He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him!”

The goal of the dynamic, relational process of sanctification—the whole purpose of God’s gracious activity in our lives—is to “get our hearts full of the love of God.” May the prayer of our sisters, Mary and Hester, be our own.

39Quoted in Mary Tooth, A Letter to the Loving and Beloved People of the Parish of Madeley (Shifnal: Printed by A. Edmonds, n.d.), 17–18.