THE POWER OF SPIRITUAL POWERLESSNESS IN THE MISSIONARY OUTREACH OF JOHN WESLEY

FRANCIS FROST

The underlying insight of the present essay is the gospel paradox of power in weakness: the conviction that gospel powerlessness shaped the whole of John Wesley's spiritual itinerary, subsequent to the Aldersgate conversion experience, and underpinned every stage of the rapid growth of the movement of spiritual renewal over which Wesley exercised undisputed authority until his death. This will inevitably lead on to asking what place the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience held, both in the personal spiritual itinerary of Wesley and in the Methodist Movement to which it gave birth. Hence the two parts of the exposition which follows.

I

Whatever conceptual framework Wesley may have borrowed from classical Protestant solifideism, the real content of the Aldersgate conversion experience on May 24, 1738 was not limited to justifying faith. It was a total act of self-surrender, in love as well as trusting faith, to the redeeming mercy of God, made known to him in the passion and death of Jesus. The obstacle overcome in this self-surrender was the ever recurrent tendency towards moral egocentrism of a hypersensitive conscience, typically English and Puritan, and not, in the least, German and Lutheran. Wesley's high ideal of Christian perfection, although pursued out of genuine self-dedication to God, still remained a pursuit of moral self-determination and moral self-possession. A Copernican revolution had to take place at the deepest level of the soul: Wesley had to give up, in surrender to God, all that he was attempting to achieve spiritually and morally for God's very sake.

This is not classical Protestant justification by faith. It is the experience of all the great saints of the Catholic Church prior to the Protestant Reformation, and going back to Saint Peter and the other apostles: "Lovest thou me more than these others do?" says Jesus to Peter, after the Resurrection. To Peter's triple reply in the affirmative, Jesus adds: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not." And the gospel writer concludes: "This spake he [Jesus], signifying by what death he
should glorify God.”

Peter, having failed to follow Jesus faithfully, on his own initiative and relying on his own strength, must embrace that spiritual poverty which consists in following Jesus to the Cross, in reliance on the Cross of Jesus alone.

Wesley, it is true, would never have thought of citing this text of St. John’s gospel to illustrate his own surrender in spiritual poverty to the love of Jesus. In *Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, however, published in 1759, he says of his encounter with the Swedish pietist, Arvid Gradin, at Herrnhut, only three months after Aldersgate:

> After he had given me an account of his experience, I desired him to give me, in writing, a definition of ‘the full assurance of faith’ which he did in the following words:—“Repose (requies) in the blood of Christ, a firm confidence in God, and persuasion of His favour, the highest tranquility, serenity, and peace of mind; with a deliverance from every fleshly desire, and a cessation of all, even inward sins.” This was the first account I ever heard from any living man of what I had before learned myself from the oracles of God, and had been praying for (with the little company of our friends), and expecting for several years.

That what Wesley had learned through his eminently practical and realistic turn of mind, was never reducible to a fornsenst covering with the blood of Christ, according to classical Protestant solifideism, is clearly spelled out in statements, made three years later, in *Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection* (1762). Of our direct relationship with Jesus he says:

> To abandon all, to strip one’s self of all, in order to seek and follow Jesus Christ, naked to Bethlehem, where he was born; naked to the hall where He was scourged; and naked to Calvary, where he died on the Cross, is so great a mercy, that neither the thing nor the knowledge of it, is given to any, but through faith in the Son of God.

In other words, spiritual poverty is a gift of God’s merciful love. There is a likeness to Jesus, in intimacy with Him, which only the surrender of trusting faith, inherent in that poverty, can make known (“knowledge” in the quotation) and, above all communicate as a living reality (“the thing”).

However, an objection inevitably springs to mind. How can we be sure of interpreting correctly statements of this kind, made by Wesley, without setting them within the context of his spiritual itinerary? But, it is precisely concerning this itinerary that Wesley is so tantalizingly silent after Aldersgate. Apart from occasional references in his correspondence to inner anguish or darkness, quite the opposite to the joyful progress towards perfection which he preached to others, he never refers to the state of his soul. To a steward who challenged him at a love-feast in Macclesfield to say whether, like others present, he had, or not, reached the state of entire sanctification, he replied simply: “By the grace of God, I am what I am.”

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1St. John 21:15, 18–19.
3Ibid., 99.
ence to a passage of Chapter VI, Book II of The Imitation of Christ. A Kempis says: "What thou art, that thou art; nor canst thou be said to be greater than God sees thee to be." If, then, Wesley chose to stand under the judgment of God alone, how can we know in what way he applied to himself statements which he made in his treatises on "Christian Perfection," or elsewhere, after the Aldersgate experience?

One approach to a partial solution of this difficulty is to chart out the influences on Wesley of writers on mysticism and of his successive and changing reactions to them. Such is the very laudable approach taken by Robert Tuttle in his Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition. But from a Roman Catholic standpoint, it is faced with another insurmountable obstacle. Wesley drew quite considerably, not only on authors standing within orthodox Roman Catholicism, but also on Jansenists and Quietists who deviated from it. The resulting conflict in the messages received by Wesley, cannot but have contributed, in part at least, to both his caution and his changes of attitude towards all Christian mysticism. Mysticism as a system of thought, albeit in the realm of spiritual conduct and, therefore, of what Wesley called "practical divinity," could no more satisfy the deepest aspirations of his heart and soul, than the formal dogmatic propositions of classical Protestantism. In the last resort, what saved him from becoming completely muddled in his efforts to arrive at a correct understanding of the conflicting views with which he was confronted by genuine Catholic mystics, on the one hand, and deviant Jansenists and Quietists on the other; what gave ultimate practical and pastoral coherence to the fruits of his inner spiritual development in outward missionary incentive, was his incomparable knowledge of Holy Scripture and his interpretation of it, according to the inspiration stemming from total spiritual self-dedication, an acutely sensitive Puritan conscience and down-to-earth British common sense!

Hence, the crucial importance of the conclusion: the intimate connection between conversion to spiritual poverty at Aldersgate and a preferential love of those who had been disinherited by the English society to which Wesley belonged. The inseparability of this link could be stated in this way. Awareness of total dependence, in poverty, on God's redeeming love in Jesus made Wesley aware of how unconditional that redeeming love is for every member of the human race without exception, but more especially for those whom sin and spiritual powerlessness seem to put at the furthest distance from it. Consequently, Wesley could no longer bear the scandal of an exclusion of a large proportion of the population of England from the material, social, and cultural benefits of society, of which the consequence was the even greater scandal of deprivation of Christian pastoral care and of the very possibility of hearing the gospel news of the love of God for us in Jesus. He would then

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*The Imitation of Christ*: Book II, chapter VI, no. 3.

*See Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Chapter 1.
leave aside classical pastoral channels of communication. He would go to the disinherited poor where they were. He would tell them that there was not a single one of them, incapable of that self-surrender, which allows Jesus to enfold us in His love and of which he had had a privileged experience at Aldersgate.

But at Aldersgate, he could not embrace, in his personal self-surrender, all the demands which, as resulting from his preferential love of the poor, the Methodist Movement was going to make on his pastoral generosity. The clearest indication, therefore, of how far, or, in what way, there was a deepening of that self-surrender after Aldersgate lies in the interrelationship between the other participants in that movement, especially the preachers and other active collaborators, and the person of Wesley. It is in this interaction that the increasing spiritual and pastoral demands progressively unfold: But what are these demands?

In his American Academy of Religion Lecture, “Early Methodism and the Poor,” Tom Albin says of the first Methodist Societies: “In short, the Methodist Societies functioned like a lay religious order which enabled men and women to work out their own salvation, and at the same time maintain a socially redemptive involvement with the poor and vulnerable around them.”7 A large number of such “lay religious orders” do, in fact, exist within the Catholic Church at the present time. Of such a kind are what are called “Secular Institutes.” As distinct from the public profession of the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, in the permanent community life of religious orders or congregations in the strict sense, the member of a Secular Institute observes these vows in an individual and hidden way, thus leaving room for all the diverse forms of responsibility in the secular world. But although hidden, the practice of the vows involves a detachment from worldly possessions and worldly power which lifts the exercise of secular responsibility into the sphere of Christian Agape. Thus the powerlessness of the gospel is destined to leaven, with its power, the whole lump of secular living. This is what the Methodist Movement, at least in its early stages, actually did to English society under the leadership of Wesley. Are we to conclude, then, that Wesley accepted the spiritual ideal embodied in the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience as the most effective way of enabling the Methodist Movement to bring the power of gospel powerlessness to the economic, social, moral, and spiritual integration of the disinherited and marginalized poor into the mainstream of English society? Did the impact of the Methodist Movement upon Wesley himself cause him to deepen his abandonment of himself to the will of God in terms of the practice of poverty, celibate chastity and obedience? It is to these fundamental questions that we must now turn.

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7Quoted according to Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition, p. 164.
The Power of Spiritual Powerlessness

II

1. Poverty

Wesley knew full well that the spiritual poverty, entailed in the giving up of oneself in love to a love which is first given to us in the redemptive act of Jesus, cannot take root in the soul without a modicum of material poverty. On Tuesday, August 27, 1776, he writes in his Journal: "In the evening, I preached in an open space at Mevagissey, to most of the inhabitants of the town; where I saw a very rare thing—men swiftly increasing in substance, and yet not decreasing in holiness." The rarity of increase in wealth not leading to a stifling of the spiritual life causes him, over and over again, to bewail the possessors of stately homes, who have expended their energy on the amassing of transient material goods. On Thursday, July 16, 1778, of Lord Charlemont's estate he writes: "But what is all this, unless God is here? Unless he is known, loved and enjoyed? Not only, 'vanity' unable to give happiness, but ' vexation of spirit.'"8

Wesley was greatly influenced by the example of the Jerusalem community in Acts, in which there was a complete sharing of material goods, no one considering anything to be his own. 9 This example was, of course, taken up by the monastic movement in both East and West. But Wesley knew that he could not ask this of his followers whom, apart from the itinerant preachers, he encouraged in their commitment to all the economic consequences of social, professional, and family life. In his eighth sermon on the Sermon on the Mount, he therefore asks the Methodists to live, if not according to the state of the Jerusalem community, at least according to its spirit: "We exhort you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be 'willing to communicate': κοινωνικός εἶναι; to be of the same spirit (though not in the same outward state) with those believers of ancient times, who remained steadfast, ἐν τῇ κοινωνίᾳ, in that blessed and holy fellowship, wherein 'none said that anything was his own, but they had all things common.'"10 Once again, it is precisely this spirit which members of Secular Institutes in the Roman Catholic Church, at the present day, who may of necessity have to dispose of large sums of money, are asked to cultivate. Hence the crucial importance of Wesley's teaching about the spirit of poverty.

The key to this teaching is the ideal of Christian stewardship. Whatever possessions we may have, we have received through the bounty of God's particular providence for each one of us. Therefore, we must be stewards of these possessions, in accordance with the providential will of God and in the light of the central gospel precept of love of neighbor. Thus, Wesley continues his

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8 Ecclesiastes 1:14.
9 Acts 4:32.
application of the Jerusalem community example to the Methodists as follows:

Be a steward, a faithful and wise steward of God and of the poor; differing from them in these two circumstances only—that your wants are first supplied, out of the portion of your Lord’s goods which remains in your hands; and that you have the blessedness of giving. Thus “lay up for yourselves a good foundation” not in the world which now is, but rather “for the time to come that ye may lay hold on eternal life.”

If legitimate gainful employment and the thrift of a simple life-style lead to the acquisition of more than is necessary for the sustaining of that life-style, then all of the surplus must be given to the poor.

This is the true meaning of the triple injunction of his sermon on The Use of Money: “Gain all you can,” “Save all you can,” “Give all you can.” At first sight it would seem to be advocating economic individualism and not voluntary poverty in renunciation of material means or goods. In fact the key injunction, according to Wesley’s understanding, is: “Give all you can.” It transforms the “Save all you can” into not holding back from the poor and needy any surplus possessions.

Nor indeed, can man properly be said to save anything, if he only lays it up. You may as well throw your money into the seas as bury it in the earth. And you may as well bury it in the earth, as in your chest, or in the Bank of England . . . . If, therefore, you would indeed “make yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness”, add the third rule to the two preceding. Having first, gained all you can, and, secondly, saved all you can, then “give all you can.”

Hence Wesley’s disappointment at the end of his life in seeing material prosperity causing Methodists completely to forget, or put aside, the true ideal of Christian stewardship. In 1790 he pleads: “. . . I give you one more advice before I sink into the dust. . . . I am pained for you who are rich in this world. Do you give all you can? . . . I pray, consider, what are you the better for what you leave behind you? . . . O leave nothing behind you.” And he adds: “Perhaps you say you can now afford the expense. This is the quintessence of nonsense. Who gave you this addition to your fortune or (to speak properly), who lent it to you? To speak more properly still, who lodged it for a time in your hands as His steward?” Of his own life-style Wesley says:

Permit me to speak freely of myself as I would of another man. I gain all I can, (namely by writing) without hurting either soul or body. I save all I can, not willingly wasting anything; not a sheet of paper, not a cup of water. I do not lay out anything, not a shilling, unless as a sacrifice to God. Yet by giving all I can, I am effectually secured from laying up treasure upon earth . . . . I cannot help leaving my books behind me, whenever God calls me hence. . . .”

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11 Ibid.
12 “The Use of Money.”
13 Sugden, Volume II, 310.
Is this Wesley blowing his own trumpet? Not in the least! His shrewd pastoral realism tells him that, by virtue of his solidarity with his followers, the judgment passed for good, or ill, by public opinion on his personal behaviour, will redound, to either the good or ill, of the Methodist Movement as a whole. Hence, the judicious comment of Sugden in his second volume of Wesley's Standard Sermons: "... apart from his book-concern, he only left the loose money in his clothes and bureau and six pounds for the poor men who should carry his body to the grave. . . ."14

Yet, however important Wesley's solidarity, in material poverty, with the poor, who swelled the ranks of Methodism, may have been to him, it would have meant nothing to him, unless it had been only one of the outward consequences of the all-embracing inward discovery of spiritual poverty at Aldersgate. Indeed it would have been reducible—and not a few modern commentators have had the cheek so to reduce it—to a sociological stance motivated by class-ideology. That such was never the case for Wesley is lucidly demonstrated by a more radical consequence of the Aldersgate discovery. After this conversion-experience, Wesley gave to the disinherited poor of England, not just his material resources, not only, even, his intellectual, cultural and spiritual resources,—No!, he gave them his very self.

Furthermore a gift so total could not but have made him vulnerable and open to interaction between the complex network of human relationships, involved in his leadership of the Methodist Movement and his personal spiritual life. That Movement owed so much to his leadership, and yet, by that very fact, could not but have had a deep impact, in its rapid growth, on his own growth in inward poverty, in loving surrender to the love of Jesus for him.

Despite his extreme discretion about his own states of soul, many pieces of evidence, provided by his Journal and his correspondence, substantiate the existence of this impact. The scope of this essay makes it necessary to limit our inquiry to two of its major characteristics: first, the growing spiritual needs of the Methodist Movement challenge Wesley to an ever-increasing other-directedness of his inner self-surrender in relation both to God and to neighbor, giving it an almost ecstatic quality, the very opposite of Quietist seeking for spiritual experience for its own sake; secondly, the ever-increasing number of the poor, who swell the ranks of the Societies, draws out to the full Wesley's capacity for direct and deeply spiritual contact with them.

A few dated references will suffice to show how he is challenged to self-denying other-directedness. The entries in the Journal to the effect that he is not insensible to the advantages, both spiritual and material, of the settled life which his brother had chosen, and that, from this point of view, itinerant preaching is a hard sacrifice for him, are too numerous to cite in their

14 Sugden, Volume II, 311.
entirety. The two following underline how single-minded dedication to what is eternal gives him the strength to carry on. On Wednesday, March 18, 1752 he writes: "I saw not one whom I knew but Mr.—'s aunt, who could not long forbear telling me how sorry she was that I should leave all my friends to lead this vagabond life. Why; indeed it is not pleasing to flesh and blood; and I would not do it if I did not believe there was another world." On Wednesday, June 23, 1779: "I rested here. Lovely place! And lovely company! But, I believe, there is another world. Therefore I must arise and go hence!" The force of the final phrase: "arise and go hence" lies in its being a quotation of words of Jesus, which seem to interrupt the discourse after the Last Supper but, which, at all events, underline the imminence of His passion and death. Here, indeed, is the key to Wesley's relentless itineracy. Ten years previous a perceptive Swedish professor of theology, J. H. Liden, on a visit to England had said of him: "This is the real reason why Mr. Wesley created so great attention by his sermons, because he spoke of a crucified Saviour and faith in his merits—such the people never had heard..."

This continually going forward in response to the urgency of the task of evangelization produces in him a self-forgetfulness which makes him rise above all the dissident voices, all the uncharity, all the calumnious gossip, which would otherwise have torn him to pieces. On February 22, 1763, he writes:

The greatest part of this spring I was fully employed in visiting the society, and settling the minds of those who had been confused and distressed by a thousand misrepresentations, indeed a flood of calumny and evil-speaking (as was easily foreseen) had been poured out on every side. My point was still to go straight forward in the work whereto I was called.

Yet his capacity to keep going forward in response to the gigantic pastoral burden laid on his shoulders, itself turns into a constraint which becomes a cross to him. In a letter of June 1766, Wesley exclaims to his brother Charles: "I am περίπλοκος [borne along], I know not how, that I can't stand still." In the last resort the interior serenity which keeps him on an even keel, in spite of all, is the fruit of grace rewarding his self-surrender. "I feel and grieve; but by the grace of God, I fret at nothing. But still 'the help that is upon earth' he 'doth it himself.' (Ps. 74:13). And this he doth in answer to many prayers." Wesley does, indeed know well how much he owes to so many hidden saints of the Methodist Societies who, in the midst of suffering and death, have abandoned themselves totally to the love of God in self-surrender. Of Mrs. Elizabeth Holmes, whom he has known for thirty years, he says what we find him saying of so many others: "I preached at Smith House, for the sake of that

17June 28, 1776, his 73rd birthday.
lovely woman, Mrs. Holmes. It does me good to see her, such is her patience, or rather thankfulness, under almost continuous pain."

Of this unique capacity for spiritual, rather than merely social contact, Wesley gives proof especially in his relationship with the poor. Numerous Journal entries show him not only organizing planned giving to the poor by the Societies, not only himself begging for them in the streets of London, or elsewhere, even in extreme old age, but, above all, entering into direct contact with them in their dingy garrets and hovels. Of the spiritual, as well as the temporal, fruit of such contact he says: "I began visiting the society (Bristol) from house to house, setting apart at least two hours in the day for that purpose. I was surprised to find the simplicity with which one and all spoke, both of their temporal and spiritual state. Nor could I have easily known by any other means how great a work God has wrought among them." The same message comes across in a Journal entry for November 24, 1760, but with the added comment that the poor are a spiritual benefit to us, as well as we to them:

How much better is it, when it can be done, to carry relief to the poor, than to send it! And that both for our own sakes and theirs. For theirs, as it is so much more comfortable to them, and as we may assist them in spirituals as well as temporals; and for our own, as it is far more apt to soften our heart, and to make us naturally care for each other.

It is precisely to produce in them the softening of their hearts that Wesley so much wants the rich, not to be content with giving to the poor at a distance, but to make direct contact with them: "I began visiting those of our society who lived in Bethnal Green Hamlet. Many of them I found in such poverty as few can conceive without seeing it. O why do not all the rich that fear God constantly, visit the poor! Can they spend part of their spare time better? Certainly not!"

In the last resort the softness of heart which Wesley wanted to see the poor communicate to the rich, stemmed, in his own heart, from his surrender to the love of Jesus: "The sympathies of grace far surpass those formed by nature. The truly devout show that passions as naturally flow from true as from false love; so deeply sensible are they of the goods and evils of those whom they love for God's sake. But this can only be comprehended by those who understand the language of love." 20

2. Celibate Chastity and Obedience to Authority

The detailed references of the foregoing analysis to Wesley's own statements about himself and others are sufficient proof of the global impact which the growing Methodist Movement had on the spiritual dispositions underly-

18April 19, 1776.
19Monday, September 9, 1776.
ing the Aldersgate conversion experience. They show how the loving providence of God drew out of Wesley's self-surrender fruits for the sanctification, both of himself personally, and of his followers. These fruits transformed his self-surrender into a daily sharing in the sufferings of the Cross of Christ.

What still needs to be demonstrated, but much more briefly, is how the practice of chastity, in a celibate state of complete continence, and accountability to external authority, as a visible consequence of fraternal communion in love with neighbor, and stemming from the invisible, but absolute, accountability of the soul to God, enter into the framework of that global impact, in so far as the Methodist Movement, at least in its early stages, functioned—to take up again the illuminating comparison of Tom Albin—like a lay religious order.

Wesley himself makes the explicit link between surrender to God in trusting faith and the call to celibacy, giving proof, once again, that, for him, there is a love in this surrender, which is absent from classical Protestant solifideism. In *Thoughts on Marriage and a Single Life* (1743) he makes this link categorically: “But who are able to keep themselves thus pure?” (“thus”, meaning: “in a celibate state”). I answer, Every Believer in CHRIST: Every one who hath living Faith in the Name of the only begotten Son of GOD...”21 In *Thoughts on a Single Life* (1764), 22 which he presents as superseding the former tract, he is much more sensitive to the nuances of the spiritual life. The call to celibacy is still linked to trusting self-surrender in faith, but the link is to be understood in general terms and does not, therefore, pre-judge what God may expect of individuals in His particular Providence.

In general, I believe every man is able to receive it [the gift about which Jesus speaks in Matthew 19:10–12] when he is first justified. I believe everyone then receives this gift; but with most it does not continue long. This much is clear, it is a plain matter of fact, which no man can deny. It is not so clear, whether God withdraws it of his own good pleasure, or for any fault of ours. I am inclined to think it is not withdrawn without some fault on our part.23

Clearly the reason for Wesley's approaching celibacy in this way is that openness to God's gift of justifying faith means for him, in the light of his Aldersgate experience, readiness to give up everything for God, to become, as he will say, when beginning field preaching, “vile” for God’s sake.

This is the positive side of what is, nevertheless, a too limited framework of reference. Wesley rejects the Catholic concept of an intervention of external authority to clarify and give stability to an inner call to celibacy, so that it can be lived out as a permanent state of life, in complementarity with other states in visible ecclesial communion. Yet the impact on him of the growing

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23Ibid., 458.
Methodist Movement makes him move part way towards this position, in a kind of piece-meal, empirical way. He realizes that he has to be open to a refining of his tightly conceived understanding of the relationship between celibacy and the willingness to give all to God because he is aware that the majority of those, with whom his leadership of the Methodist Societies bring him into contact, have the vocation to commit themselves to family and socio-professional responsibilities in the secular world. Thus, his relationships, by correspondence, with women, show that he is always ready to recommend to them the celibate ideal, whilst they remain single. When they decide to marry, he does not disapprove; rather does he show them how inward surrender in love to God is possible in marriage too.

In relation to his immediate collaborators, the itinerant preachers, he is much more insistent on the advantages of celibacy over marriage. Just after he had decided to withdraw himself from the general rule not to marry, thereby breaking all the rules of accountability: both to his brother and to the Societies, which he had managed to keep in the Grace Murray affair, he has the courage, or the cheek—one wonders which—to write on February 6, 1751, in his Journal: "I met the single men, and showed them on how many accounts it was good for those who had received that gift from God to remain single for the kingdom of heaven's sake . . ." Much later in his life, he urges the preacher Zechariah Yewdall, three times, to remain celibate. 24

In the last resort, Wesley admits to the contradiction between his foolish marriage and the call to celibacy he had received for the full accomplishment of his missionary vocation. In A Thought Upon Marriage (1785),25 he humbly sets the issue of celibacy within the framework of the experience of someone like himself who is tempted to draw back from the perception, in the surrender of loving faith to God, that marriage must be given up for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel. The witness of Henry Moore in his Life of Wesley is even more telling: "He repeatedly told me that he believed the Lord overruled this painful business (Wesley's unsuccessful marriage) for his good; and that, if Mrs. Wesley had been a better wife, he might have been unfaithful in the great work to which God had called him; and might have too much sought to please her according to her own views."26

Wesley's following of his foolish impulse to marry, linked as it is to his putting aside all the rules of accountability to others, which he had promised to accept, from the days of the Holy Club onwards, necessarily raises the issue of obedience. Was it not virtually impossible for Wesley to remain faithful to all the outward implications of the total inner obedience to the will of God, to which he had vowed himself,27 unless he was prepared to submit to

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18See D. Buttler, Methodists and Papists (1995), 70–71, and also the references he gives to Wesley’s letters in Telford, volume 8, 65, 154, 271.
20Henry Moore, Life of Wesley, Volume 2, 175.
a measure of external human authority, exercised over him in the name of God?

Accountability is at the very heart of genuine Methodist spirituality. One only has to peruse the Rules of the Band Societies, drawn up as early as December 25, 1738 to see the stringency with which those who were prepared to commit themselves to a Methodist way of life, to the full, were expected to bare their souls to others, for the promoting of their spiritual progress.

But, as uncontested head of the Methodist Movement in its entirety, could not, and did not, Wesley hold himself aloof from all of this? Did he not ask obedience of his preachers to his own authority, whilst himself owing obedience to no one?

There is at least one indication that such a situation of solitude in leadership did not correspond with his deepest desire. Of the purpose of the Select Societies, the setting-up of which entailed a spiritual commitment over and beyond what was required even in the Bands, he says:

My design was, not only to direct them [those desirous of this further commitment] now to press after perfection; to exercise their every grace, and improve every talent they had received; and to incite them to love one another more, and to watch more carefully over each other; but also to have a select company to whom I might unbosom myself on all occasions, without reserve, and whom I could propose to all their brethren as a pattern of love, of holiness, and of all good works.28

The fact that such a possibility never materialized for Wesley was not his fault. But perhaps the most conclusive evidence for Wesley’s interior readiness to be accountable, if Providence so arranged, is his true inner detachment from the position of leadership which he held. According to the last revision of the Large Minutes in 1789, Wesley faces those who accuse him of being autocratic with these courageous words:

But [he quotes] several gentlemen are offended at your having so much power. I did not seek any part of it. But when it was come unawares, not daring to bury that talent, I used it to the best of my judgment. Yet I never was fond of it. I always did and do now, bear it as my burden—the burden which God laid upon me, and therefore I dare not lay it down. But if you can tell me any one, or any five men, to whom I may transfer this burden, who can and will do just what I do now, I will heartily thank both them and you.

In fact Wesley had to perform his thankless task to the end.

III

Was Wesley a mystic? If the question means: Did Wesley refuse the teaching of the mystics that the spiritual journey inward involves passage

27 See, for instance, his prayer of self-dedication at the end of the tract Modern Christianity: Exemplified at Wednesbury (1745) (Rupert Davies, The Methodist Societies, Volume 9 of The Works of John Wesley, 158).
through the dark night of the soul in the soul’s search for union with God?, then the answer must be in the negative. But the great Catholic mystics have also taught that difficulty and suffering in the world, especially when they stem from commitment to the spreading of the gospel, bring about a purifica-
tion of the soul analogous to what is wrought in it in the dark night of prayer. Was this not the road taken by Wesley? Furthermore, what are we to make of Wesley’s repeated complaints that he does not share in the joy of a relation-
ship of love to God, which he so often preaches to others? Could it be that God asked him to share something of the desolation of the sinners to whom he preached conversion? Did he share in the cry of Jesus on the Cross: “My God, My God, why hast Thou abandoned me?”