AN EARLY METHODIST COMMUNITY OF WOMEN
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Early Methodism was comprised of many small communities of women. The preponderance of women in the Wesleyan Revival as a whole only illustrates quantitatively a much larger reality, yet to be fully explored. From time to time these women drew themselves together into intentional communities in which the rhythms of mutual accountability and active social service modeled vital Christianity to the world around them. What is of particular interest were communities of women that involved a common life in the sense of actually living together and experiencing Christian community in a cenobitic or semi-monastic style of life. Mary Bosanquet was the center of one such community, the influence and legacy of which were critical to the history of early Methodism.¹

In 1763 a property near her place of birth in Leytonstone, known locally as "The Cedars," became vacant. Mary and Sarah Ryan (the friend whom John Wesley would later describe as her "twin soul") moved there on March 24 with the intention of establishing an orphanage and school on the basis of Wesley’s own prototype at Kingswood.² John Wesley kept this model Christian community, combining vibrant personal piety and active social service, under his personal surveillance. On December 1, 1764 he expressed his optimism and great expectations concerning its progress: "M[ary] B[osanquet] gave me a further account of their affairs at Leytonstone. It is exactly Pietas Hallensis in miniature. What it will be does not

¹The standard biographical account of Mary, without any question one of the most prominent figures in Wesley’s Methodism, is that of Henry Moore, The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher, 6th ed. (London: J. Kershaw, 1824), which passed through numerous editions on both sides of the Atlantic during the 19th century. Perhaps no life was so well known to the women of early Methodism as that of Mary. A number of her publications, including her able defense of women’s preaching, A Letter to the Rev. John Wesley (1764), a catechetical writing entitled An Aunt's Advice to Her Niece (1780), and her Thoughts on Communion with Happy Spirits were widely circulated and extremely influential both during and after her lifetime.

²A part of Sarah’s responsibilities as housekeeper at the New Room in Bristol was the management of Wesley’s school from 1757 to 1761. For background information concerning the design and implementation of this project, see A. G. Ives, Kingswood School in Wesley’s Day and Since (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 7-51. Education, as we shall see, was a particular emphasis of Continental Pietism, and to this end, A. H. Francke’s Orphan-school in Halle, shaped in part by the model of Duke Ernest the Pious of Gotha, gave classical expression to this aspiration.
yet appear." The following year on December 12, 1765, he reported: "I rode to Leytonstone, and found one truly Christian family: that is, what that at Kingswood should be, and would, if it had such a governess."

After much careful deliberation the women decided to take in none but the most destitute and hopeless. The children came, as Mary recalled, "naked, full of vermin, and some afflicted with distemper." At first the family consisted of Mary, Sarah, a maid, and Sally Lawrence, Sarah Ryan's orphaned niece of about four years of age. With the addition of five more orphans and confronted with the problem of Sarah's declining health, Ann Tripp was secured as a governess for the children. They formed themselves into a tightly knit community, adopted a uniform dress of dark purple cotton, and ate together at a table five yards in length. Over the course of five years they sheltered and cared for thirty-five children and thirty-four adults.

In Mary's account of this community, she observed that "the first Light Given Concerning outward things was that we should walk according to Rule in our family." The children rose to dress in time for family prayers at 6:30. Breakfast followed at 7:00, with play until 8:00, when a full morning of educational activities commenced. An hour of free time preceded the mid-day meal at 1:00. Three hours of study and an hour devoted to household duties filled the afternoon, with supper at 6:00. Family prayers followed at 7:30 with an early bedtime of 8:00. "Family meetings" which were held on Fridays at noon provided an opportunity for the community to gather together to discuss and make decisions concerning their rule of life. Decision-making apparently included all members of the community, adults and children alike. Mary's primary responsibilities, according to her own report, included planning and leading worship, caring for the sustenance of the community, teaching the children, meeting each member of the family alone each week at a set time to discuss personal and spiritual matters,

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1Wesley, Journal, 5:102. Cf. Martin Schmidt, John Wesley: A Theological Biography, trans. Norman Goldhawk & Denis Inman (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966): 2:175–86. This “further account” supplemented the pamphlet that she had published anonymously under Wesley's auspices in November, A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley. By a Gentlewoman (London: Sold at the Foundery, in Upper Moorfields, 1764). Further research is required to determine the relationship between this document and an improperly identified manuscript in the Methodist Archives bearing the title, “An Account of the Rise & Progress of the Work of God in Latonstone, Essex, 1763,” which is in Mary Bosanquet’s unmistakable hand. Elizabeth Ritchie was identified originally as the authoress, and the volume then catalogued under Sarah Ryan, whose authorship was uncritically accepted by Brown. See Earl Kent Brown, Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 53–59. This small duodecimo volume includes the record of a diary in Mary Bosanquet’s hand as well, the entries of which, concluding on January 11, 1765 are followed by fragments last dated August 24, 1768. From this account it is clear that Mary commenced her work in Hoxton Square in February 1761.

2Wesley, Journal, 5:152.

3[Bosanquet], “Account,” unpaginated.
superintending public meetings, and caring for the sick of the community. For all intents and purposes, Mary functioned as an “abbess” of a religious community, whose influence in worship and religious life extended not simply to the “Leytonstone family,” but to the surrounding community as well.

It is not clear when Sarah Crosby became directly connected with the community of women and children at Leytonstone, but as early as September 1766 Wesley was sending letters to her at that address. From that point on it is clear that the lives of the three women, Mary and the two Sarahs, became inextricably interwoven. On February 12, 1767, Wesley was delighted by the effective ministry of the community and after preaching at Leytonstone exclaimed: “Oh what a house of God is here! Not only for decency and order, but for the life and power of religion! I am afraid there are very few such to be found in all the King’s dominions.” Having established a definitive pattern of life together on a semi-monastic model of austere communal life, disciplined religious contemplation, and service to the needy, this community transplanted its ideals to a northern setting in Yorkshire in the year 1768.

Despite Sarah Ryan’s death shortly after their resettlement at “Cross Hall,” near Leeds, the family soon became a vital center of Methodist worship and witness, as it had been in London. The life of the community was disrupted in 1781, however, when Mary fell in love with and married John Fletcher, the saintly vicar of Madeley and Wesley’s “designated successor.” The property was sold and places were found for the remnant “women of Israel in Yorkshire,” as they were affectionately known. Sarah Crosby and Ann Tripp seem to have taken up residence in Leeds with these changes, the community of women experiencing something of a metamorphosis in the process. According to J. E. Hellier, they lived in a small house adjoining the parent chapel of the original Society in Leeds, known as the Old Boggard House. Ann and Sarah together assumed leadership of a strong and influential band of women preachers, known, with unconscious humor perhaps, as the “Female Brethren.”

Mary Fletcher lived out the remainder of her life in her beloved Madeley where she died in 1815, but had left behind a “rule” for the forming

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4Moore, Fletcher, 76.
5See Wesley, Letters, 5:25–26. It is interesting to note that the letters exchanged at this time between Wesley and the community often reflect a critical disposition of the women toward Wesley’s spiritual experience. See in particular, his letter to Sarah Ryan, 5:17–18.
7J. E. Hellier, “The Mother Chapel of Leeds,” Methodist Recorder Winter Number 36 (Christmas 1895): 64. The insufficiency of records and the lack of reliable data make it difficult to determine the precise composition of this group or what their common life was like. It would seem likely, however, that Elizabeth Hurrell and Sarah Stevens participated in these new developments, and it would be surprising if, in later years, Mary Barritt did not play some part in the enterprise as well.
of good societies, both a legacy and a blueprint which must have guided Sarah and Ann, and those who joined them, in their life together:

1. Consider no one a member who is not steadily seeking after Christian perfection; that is a heart simplified by love divine.
2. Come together with a lively expectation our souls should be refreshed by our meeting, as our bodies should be refreshed by our food.
3. Bear with each other's mistakes or infirmities in love.
4. Be well aware of that deadly poison so frequent among professors, I mean evil-speaking.
5. Hold Fast the Truth.
6. Be always ready to give an account to those who ask you a reason of the hope that is in you. Here is the command to testify freely.
7. Keep your eyes fixed on Christ, your Head.
8. Consider yourselves as united by a holy covenant to God and to each other; aiming to advance the glory of God all you possibly can.10

John Wesley had already made an explicit connection between this unique community of women in its original setting and the so-called Stiftungen of August Hermann Francke in his observation that they were "exactly Pietas Hallensis in miniature."11 The close connections between Continental Pietism and the Wesleyan movement, particularly through the relationship of the Wesleys to its Moravian expression, are well known and do not need to be rehearsed here.12 What is of significance is the striking affinity, in both spirit and methodology, of the Leytonstone experiment and Francke's Halle/Glaucha enterprise. While the exact extent of Mary Bosanquet's knowledge of Francke's work is difficult to ascertain, it would appear that the Orphan-house Stiftung (Institute) founded by him in Halle in 1695 was a primary model for her own community, the major difference being its exclusively female character.

Francke's practical spirituality is tersely summarized in the title of Sattler's recent biographical study, God's Glory, Neighbor's Good. The

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10Moore, Fletcher, 80-82.
characteristic foci of the Pietist program of church renewal are all present in his distinctive communities, but more important than anything else was his rediscovery of \( \text{tätige Liebe} \) ("active love") as the most important aspect of the life of faith. This lofty ideal of "active love conjoined to faith" was most appropriately realized, he believed, in a Christian \( \text{koinonia} \) (community) that lived out its faith in service to the world. This is precisely what Wesley discerned in his visits to the Leytonstone family and what elicited his strong statements of support and hope. In both Glaucha and Halle, Francke had provided a redemptive alternative to the poorhouse, workhouse, and penal institution is one wholistic model. The Leytonstone family was nothing less than this, but certainly more.

While the parallelism between the Halle and Leytonstone Orphan-schools is striking, even more dramatic are the similarities with the Beguine communities of the medieval world. Leslie Church was the first to allude to this fascinating connection in his description of the Leytonstone community as "a school, an orphanage, a hospital and a kind of \( \text{beguinage} \) for poor widows."\(^{13}\) The beguines have been described as the "first European women's movement."\(^{14}\) Essentially these were pious women who chose to lead communal lives of prayer and service, first founding their communities (known as beguinages) in the 12th century in the Netherlands and Belgium. They lived a semi-monastic and somewhat austere communal life without vows. While free to maintain private property, to leave the community, and even to marry, they generally made an informal vow to remain celibate while living as beguines.\(^{15}\) A host of factors gave rise to this movement, including major demographic and social disruptions, in addition to shifting currents of religious enthusiasm, in the late medieval world. The breadth and depth of the movement defy simplistic conclusions of any kind. While the intrinsic nature of the movement militated against the development of a single style or pattern of life, however, Colledge notes (in the form of a generalization) the unique contribution which the beguines made to the development of Christian community: "Free from monastic enclosure, observing the rules which they themselves devised to meet the needs of individual communities,

\(^{13}\) Leslie Church, \textit{More about the Early Methodist People} (London: Epworth Press, 1949), 189. No effort is made in this work, however, to expand the image or to identify critical points of convergence.


\(^{15}\) Most noteworthy, perhaps, among the beguines were three 13th century women, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Beatrice of Nazareth, and Hadewygh of Brabant, whose mystical writings have been rediscovered in our time.
following lives of intense activity which might be devoted to prayer, to teaching and study, to charitable works, or to all three," they afforded a new model of religious contemplation and service to the world.16

It was customary for each beguinage to appoint one or more "grand mistresses," whose responsibility it was to administer the community and order its life. Younger aspiring women were placed under the care of older, mature beguines who guided them through an informal novitiate of one or two years. "Taking the habit" marked an important turning point in the life of each candidate, as Fiona Bowie explains:

The beguine habit evolved only slowly. In the early days beguines dressed much as other women, although more simply, avoiding expensive cloth and ornamentation, but eventually a grey or blue habit, which from the seventeenth century became black with a white head covering, was adopted. If the "novice mistress" and council considered the applicant suited to beguine life the candidate would make a simple promise to "offer themselves to Christ," to "live religiously all their lives" or "to serve the Lord Jesus Christ in the habit of a beguine."17

While life from one community to another could vary greatly, a number of common elements can be discerned. A monastic pattern of prayer and devotion provided the "spiritual rhythm" of the house. The women were expected to attend mass daily, to set aside time for meditational reading and reflection, to say the Divine Office, and to observe the penitential and celebrative traditions of medieval Catholicism. Weaving, bleaching, carding, and spinning filled those hours of the day set apart from devotional practices and social services among the poor. In contrast to the convents of the day that catered to the needs of the gentry and nobility, teaching was reserved for those children who were marginalized and deprived of education. This led to large numbers of resident children and orphans in many of the homes. According to Bowie, a 1646 census of the Great Beguinage in Leuven revealed "a total of 272 children living in about sixty different houses (out of a total of around a hundred), the number of children exceeding that of beguines."18

The parallels are striking. This could just as easily be a description of the Leytonstone family of early Methodism. While there is no evidence that Mary had any direct knowledge of the beguine tradition, the kindredness of spirit is unmistakable. There is a connectedness here to the roots of a com-

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16 E. Colledge, *Medieval Netherlands Religious Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 8. For a particularly incisive discussion of "Group Life within the Beguinehouse" and a discussion of the distinction between "prebendal" (private interest) and "corporative" (common consciousness) communities, see Phillips, *Beguines*, 156-59. Their mystical tendencies and sympathies with heterodox movements of the same era eventually led to their dissolution. Following a century of persecution the beguines had become little more than charitable institutions by the 15th century and were nearly extinguished entirely at the time of the French Revolution.


mon inheritance, a practical spirituality in the Catholic tradition, a way of life that was exerting such a critical influence upon the Wesleys themselves during the early years of the Revival.\(^9\) In addition to the well-documented influence of Catholic devotional writers, such as Thomas à Kempis, Brother Lawrence, and Gregory Lopez, or the post-Tridentine Catholic works of Blaise Pascal and Madame Bourignon, the influence of two exemplars of the Catholic spiritual tradition is striking with regard to its potential connection to the women's communities via Wesley.

According to Butler, "in 1758 Wesley claimed that de Renty's *Life* was his favourite book; certainly it was the one that he quoted from most of his later life."\(^{20}\) Among the reasons for Wesley's love of de Renty which Eamon Duffy has identified in his incisive study of "Wesley and the Counter Reformation," he includes the Marquis' charitable work for the poor, the simplicity and austerity of his style of life, and his promotion of religious societies in Paris and Toulouse.\(^{21}\) Fenelon, famed Archbishop of Cambrai, exerted a second, powerful influence, especially in his concept of "true simplicity" in the Christian life, what Wesley would have described as "singleness of eye." In one of the Archbishop's letters to the Duke of Burgundy, reproduced by Wesley in his *Christian Library*, he speaks eloquently of the love of friends. "The love of God," which, according to Fenelon is resident in the heart of the believer, "loves its friends without views of self-interest, and so loves them patiently with all their faults; it seeks no more but what God has given them; it looks to nothing in them but God and his gifts."\(^{22}\) Wesley and his Leytonstone women, with their dual imperative of love for God and love for neighbor, certainly resonated with the Catholic spirit of this practical mysticism.

All of these connections should make Mary Bosanquet's virtually unknown 1766 tract entitled *Jesus, Altogether Lovely* somewhat less of a surprise, but the form and nature of the spiritual direction she provides is truly astounding. Published in the same year as Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, this tract is actually a letter written from Hoxton on March 10, 1763, just two weeks prior to her settlement at Leytonstone with


\(^{22}\) John Wesley, *Christian Library*, 38:5–7. It is interesting to note that the Pietist Francke was an ardent defender of Miguel de Molinos, a major proponent of this school of Spanish Quietism.
Sarah Ryan. When seen within the context of this critical development, on the very eve of their inauguration of a semi-monastic community for women, the document takes on heightened significance. “My desire and prayer to God for you,” writes Mary to a group of unidentified single women, “is, that you may every moment behold Jesus, as altogether lovely!... That there is but one way of beholding him now, and that this way is by faith, we all know; but how to keep this eye of the soul always clear and unsullied, like the finest glass, free from every speck and flaw, is the point we want to be instructed in.”

Essential to the task of keeping their “eye simply fix’d on Jesus,” she explains, is the necessity for them to “take up their cross daily” and to “deny themselves.” Concluding her prefatory comments on the nature of this self-denial, Mary makes her “spiritual program” explicit and outlines its central components:

I was not a little blest the other day with the words of a good man, expressing his desire of being devoted to God, in a solemn observance of chastity, poverty, and obedience. The words struck me much, and appeared to contain the whole of a Christian life. The Lord was pleased to apply them close to my soul; and I will endeavour simply to relate what then occurred on each head.

Mary begins her discussion of chastity, the first of the three traditional monastic vows, by quoting the familiar beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Here is the essence of chastity “in its [allegorical] first sense,” namely, with reference to Jesus and the soul. Purity of heart enables the believer to reflect the “glorious image of Christ,” the one who is “fairer than ten thousand, and altogether lovely,” as in a clear mirror. In Wesleyan theology in general, so here in particular, holiness is the goal, the heart the center, and the health of the soul the key to happiness in God and life.

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Mary expands the images which were “in a lively manner imprest on my mind,” as she explains:

We should consider our souls as the image of God, and our bodies as the temples of the Lord, both pure and consecrated to his service; and our hearts as an altar, on which the love of Jesus, as a pure flame, should continually burn, and that the fewel [sic] we are to cast into this fire, is every earthly object that presenteth itself, whether to the eye, the ear, or any other of our senses, casting them in, as soon as perceived, feeling the force of that expression, “All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice to Jesu’s love”!

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24Bosanquet, Jesus, 2–3. The identity of Mary’s source is yet to be determined. I would heartily welcome any speculations or formal identifications!
25Mary even includes the classic text, “without holiness of heart, no man shall see the Lord,” in the body of her narrative. See my discussion of “The goal of happiness in Christ” in my article entitled, “Sanctification as Lived by Early Methodist Women,” Methodist History 34, 2 (January 1996): 93–95.
26Mary quotes here from the second stanza of the famous hymn of Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”
An Early Methodist Community of Women

In her exposition of the second sense of chastity (the more earthy side), Mary applies herself directly to the single women she addresses, confessing that some who stand outside their circle may be offended by her sentiments on the subject. Convinced, however, that it is not her "business to please," she offers her advice to those who have chosen to live a single life.

To you, who are able to receive this saying, I will speak the inmost sentiments of my heart. Whatever others are, you are called to the glorious privileges of a single life. O cast them not behind you; nor, having beheld the beauties of the lovely Jesus, now forget, that he is fairer than the sons of men. I shall not attempt to enumerate the particular advantages of your situation. I am not persuading you to it. I need not. All your soul stretches itself out, after that entire devotion to him, whom having seen you love.

Mary then advises the women to guard against three dangerous snares. Firstly, avoid men, especially single ones. Secondly, do not succumb to the temptation of thinking that there are more advantages to another way of life. Rather, "stand all the day long on your watchtower," she admonishes, "fixing it in your mind, I have given myself wholly unto thee; and 'will know no other love than thine.'" Thirdly, pride and a judgmental spirit, especially toward those who have not embraced the same style of life to which you have been called, Mary claims, will bring everything to nothing.

O beware of judging; for God is love, and every wound to love may therefore, in some sense be said, to be a wound to God. May he, who came, not to judge, but to save the world, preserve you from this most pernicious of all evils. Never then consider yourself as secure, but hang every moment on Jesus as if on the very brink of falling; and let your reading, meditation and prayer, turn as much as may be, on the advantages of a single life. And may a holy ambition, to know nothing but Jesus, fire your spirits, while you are made deeply sensible, "no grace can be guarded but by humility." 27

Mary's explication of poverty follows a similar line of argument. She examines it first with regard to "outward things," and then with reference to "the temper of the soul." In the first instance, she points immediately to the example of Christ. But she is quick to avoid a too literal "imitation of Christ" that would compromise our individual callings as Christians in the world. "I do not here mean," she clarifies, "that we are always bound, at once to dispose of all we have in this world, in order to become a Christian. By no means. We should in many cases, by so doing, put it out of our power to act in that sphere of life, God hath called us unto." The most important point with regard to poverty in this outward sense is to realize "that nothing of what we possess is properly our own." The key is proper stewardship over the resources with which we have been blessed, and a constant care never to consider something to be necessary which we know "in God's account is not so."

27It is interesting that Mary makes no mention of celibacy in any of her discussions of chastity. It would be interesting as well to speculate about her reflections on this early tract after her marriage to John Fletcher in later life. To my knowledge, no references to this work appear in her journal or any of the accounts of her life.
Poverty in temporal things, however, is a symbolic, perhaps even superficial, representation of the deeper issue of "spiritual poverty," upon which subject Mary next expends considerable energy. In Wesleyan sermonic-essay fashion, she discusses what poverty of spirit is not, what it is, and what its fruits are. This poverty does not consist in denigrating the good things God has done in our lives. Neither does it involve the sacrifice of our own authenticity in an effort to become all things to all people. Rather, spiritual poverty consists in "the true knowledge of ourselves, from the light of God shining on our hearts, by faith. And this knowledge is the ground and foundation of all religion." 28

Moreover, this spirit liberates the creature so as to enter into the fullest possible fellowship with the Creator, delighting both in God's justice and God's mercy and drinking deeply into the spirit of humility. As to its fruits, spiritual poverty "will shew itself in various ways; but in none more than these four: unwearied patience, constant gentleness, entire resignation, and a perfect willingness to be accounted nothing in the esteem of man." Concerning this last and most crucial quality, Mary simply adds: "I have some reason to fear there is too little of this spirit among us... It is your heart I pray the Lord to model; and then you will soon be convinced, nothing is little, that can either help or hinder your progress in holiness."

Always the practical spiritual guide, Mary concludes her discussion of poverty with "three more little instances of self-denial, which you will find very conducive to the spirit I am speaking of." Do not push yourself forward. Avoid conspicuous places that draw attention to yourself. And above all, "beware of proud thoughts." Self-sufficiency and independency of spirit, the arrogant and reckless claim of our autonomy before God and our fellow creatures is the sure path to destruction. The watch-word is, "I am nothing; God is all." 29

"To you who have kept the faith, it will not be grievous to say, Study obedience as the rule of your life. Obedience to God, and to man, for his sake." While we owe God "absolute and entire" obedience in things both great and small, just as in her discourse on poverty, so too here, Mary focuses her attention on the little things in which "we are most apt to offend."

In short, we should see God in every thing, and make it our sole business, inwardly to listen to that still small voice, which none but silent souls can hear; and outwardly, to meet him in the order of his providence, remembering we are all his own, and

28 John Wesley defined "repentance" as true self-knowledge and described this as the "porch of religion." Cf. Wesley, Letters, 4:146.
29 See my discussion of "the all sufficiency of God's grace" and "theonamy" related to the prayer of Hester Ann Rogers. "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... The acclamation, 'He is all!' immediately springs from the confession, 'I am nothing.'" Chilcote, "Sanctification," 91-93.
"lying before him as soft wax, ready to be formed into any shape he pleases." And this simple recollecting ourselves in the presence of God, receiving every occurrence as from him; and offering up every action to him, is the spirit and life of true religion.

With regard to that obedience which we owe to those in authority, it does not consist merely in "affection" (I will obey because I love him.), or in "virtue" (I will obey because he is very spiritual.). Rather, we obey simply and purely out of love to God (I will obey because it is God I obey in him.). On this subject, Mary quotes her unknown source at length:

"We should be wholly given up to the conduct of him, whom God hath placed over us, in all things (where no sin lies) following his judgment not our own, except in very particular cases, where his commands actually wound our conscience, in which case we ought to say so, and lay it before two or three impartial persons. And if they all agree, and we still can.getResult his advice, it argues not strength but weakness of grace."

The same author describes "three degrees in this obedience." The first and lowest degree is when we willingly submit to those commands we are obliged to submit to. The second is complying to orders we are not obliged to comply with. The third and most perfect degree of obedience is "when knowing our superior's will, and not waiting for his orders, we prevent them by an antecedent conformity."

Mary concludes her spiritual guidance with a plea for the cultivation of the primary Christian virtue:

Cry for an obedient, humble, peaceable spirit. O were we all but penetrated with true humility. . . . The earnest desire of my soul for you is, that you may abide in the faith, and [e]ndure unto the end. That you may covet to walk in the most excellent way, and be found continually standing on your guard and watching unto prayer. Then will the eternal God be your refuge, and underneath you, the everlasting arms. He will set your sins far from you; and cause you to dwell in purity of heart and in safety. You shall be a people saved of the Lord, who shall himself become your guide and your exceeding great reward.

What are we to make of this amazing document? Of one thing we can be very clear, that on the eve of the Leytonstone experiment, Mary Bosanquet's mind was revolving around a model or models for living out the Christian faith with integrity and in community with other women. At the center of this vision was a concern for holiness and happiness rooted in purity of heart or intention, one of the central pillars of her nascent Wesleyan heritage and a conception of the Christian life which permeates Wesley's Plain Account of the same year. One way forward in the journey toward this "altogether lovely vision" was through a solemn observance of chastity, poverty, and obedience, all of which, coming out of the rich monastic tradition of the West, points unmistakably to humility as the essence of the Christian faith. And all of this, Mary would attempt to live out in a community which in its praxis conjoined serious religious contemplation and active social service.

This is the foundation upon which the Leytonstone women built a spirituality of active love. The confluence of beguine, Pietist, and Catholic
monastic spirituality in the Christian praxis of this group is truly remarkable. The mystical writings of the beguines are filled with the images of God’s inbreaking transformation of life, a divine presence that is personal and intimate, and of struggles that must be endured along the way toward holiness. “The journey,” as Bowie writes, “may be perceived as hard, . . . but it is a way freely chosen and rewarding in this life, not merely in the life to come.” Contemplation and action was its key. For Francke and the Halle Pietists, the Christian life was a life of self-denial in the service of active love, of obedience to the law of love reflected in God’s glory and neighbor’s good, and of childlike faith and absolute trust in God. The consequence of obedient, active love was joy. The monastic heritage elevated the lofty vision of a Christian community in which one discovers the basis of relationship within the life of a family, in which harmony, wholeness, and balance are the consequence of obedient love and service to others, and in which humility liberates the self to love as Christ has loved.

All these elements are central to the life and witness of the women of early Methodism and the Leytonstone family in particular. Their spirituality of active love rested on the solid foundation of humility, the acknowledgment of true self-knowledge as the path to hope in Christ and intimacy with God. Surrender to Christ, reliance upon him in all the vicissitudes of life, and a commitment to learning from him through obedience to the law of love were all important means toward the flying goal of the Christian life; to possess a heart that was “altogether lovely,” like that of Jesus, because it was filled with the love of God.

"Bowie, Beguine Spirituality, 42."