



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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What Is Missing from Wesley?

The life of John Wesley is usually presented so as to leave no doubt of his saintly character. It would be a bold biographer indeed who would cast any aspersions on this picture of the man who is considered a "Methodist Saint." I vividly remember standing by the tomb of Wesley when a tourist asked the guide why Wesley had not been buried in consecrated ground. The guide looked up as though surprised and then said quietly, "He is buried in consecrated ground. His very life has consecrated the ground in which his body lies." Some other tourist added an "Amen!" to the guide's statement. Certainly, few persons, if any, lived as holy a life as John Wesley. And yet, to me, there always seems to be something lacking in Wesley and in some members of the Wesley family.

What I fail to find in Wesley is a kind of spontaneous compassion. Do not mistake me, Wesley was certainly a compassionate man. Notice how kindly he treated Richard Ellison and Westley Hall, two men who had badly mistreated two of Wesley's sisters, Susanna, and Martha. I doubt if either man would have said that Wesley lacked compassion. However, his compassion was more contrived than spontaneous. He helped people not because he loved them and was concerned for their welfare, but because he thought it was the right thing to do. His generosity was conditioned by concepts of right and wrong.

If I had known Wesley, I doubt if I could ever have truly loved the man. I think I could have loved Samuel Johnson in spite of all his gruffness and his glaring faults. There was a spontaneity about his compassion that seems lacking in Wesley. Samuel Johnson reports noticing little boys sleeping in boxes to keep warm as he himself made his way home late at night. Again and again he stooped down and placed pennies in their tightly closed hands so they

would have something to help them through the next day. Maybe he should have done far more, but as far as we know Wesley never even noticed these children.

It is a curious fact that in spite of the length of Wesley's Journal there is little in it that would give one a complete picture of London life in the 18th century. I am not talking of the religious life, or the meetings, or the theological quarrels that characterized the century. I am speaking rather of that human side of the city which one finds in John Gay's poem on London Trivia or even in *The Beggar's Opera*.

I recently gave to a friend my little book *London Cries*. It describes the cries that were heard on London streets as both men and women shouted about their wares and what they had for sale. There is no evidence that Wesley heard these cries, stopped to make a purchase from the vendors, or even invited them to one of his meetings. It is doubtful if he considered them beneath his notice. But there was no visible need that would call forth his contrived compassion. His heart simply did not go out to them. It is possible that if a modern social worker had traveled the streets of 18th century London his or her heart would have gone out to many people who were overlooked by the Wesleys.

Probably we should add that John Wesley did notice two criers of London. In a letter to the *London Chronicle* dated April 5, 1763, Wesley notes a man who was crying, "The Scripture doctrine of Imputed Righteousness asserted and maintained by the Rev. John Wesley." Wesley apparently bought one of the pamphlets and found he had not written a word of it. Toward the end of the letter to the *Chronicle* he states: "A man was stretching his throat near Moorfields and screaming out, 'A full and true Account of the Death of the Rev. George Whitefield!' One took hold of him, and said, 'Sirrah! what do you mean? Mr. Whitefield is yonder before you.' He shrugged up his shoulders and said, 'Why, sir, an honest man must do something to turn a penny.'"

The Wesleys were both aware that children in the 18th century were being hanged for what we would consider minor offenses, but they did not raise a voice of compassion against this horrible practice. Why? They lacked a certain spontaneous compassion that would have stirred their lives into action.

I am inclined to think this lack was due primarily to their upbringing. In the Wesley household, where discipline and love clashed, discipline was given the priority. Only in her old age did Susanna Wesley reveal the love that abided deep in her heart, and she expressed her love toward her grandchildren. This annoyed John who said that his mother who had managed her own family so well could never manage one grandchild. Ralph Sockman, the famous New York preacher, would have laughed heartily at this remark for once he said to me, "Fred, the grandchildren should come first. They're more fun!"

Wesley wrote a great deal about being perfect in love. He described Christian perfection in these terms. But what he meant by this and how he was defining the word love is still a mystery. He carefully examined Methodists

claiming to be perfect in love or having Christian perfection as a doctor might examine a patient. It is little wonder that the results were disastrous. For a time he thought of discarding the doctrine entirely. He who does not understand love will have little success in finding it by the use of Wesley's methods.

Each Sunday I visit the sick in the retirement home where I am living. I do it because I am a clergyman and I feel this is one of my duties. Like Wesley, I think it is the right thing to do. But if a close relative were in the infirmary right or wrong would play no part. I would visit because of my love for the individual. I would feel a kind of spontaneous compassion which I might not feel for the others I visit. Wesley was always guided by what he felt was right rather than by an overwhelming love or a spontaneous compassion. In short, I doubt if Wesley was a very lovable person. And maybe it was good for Methodism that he wasn't. Whitefield was a more lovable character, but he left no abiding movement or church. It may be that true leadership requires a person with a measuring rod rather than a person with a heart.