

## METHODISM AND THE ARTICULATION OF FAITH: “NO HOLINESS BUT SOCIAL”

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We begin with three quotations from John Wesley, which bear directly on the theme of this article. “The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.” “The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.” “This doctrine [i.e., scriptural holiness or Christian Perfection] is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appears to have raised us up.”<sup>1</sup>

Wesley’s rejection of “solitary religion” as unbiblical is typically uncompromising. It may well recall his caustic repudiation of the hermit’s or anchorite’s version of the Christian life lived in solitude and isolation from human society. Wesley is on record as protesting that, in his judgment, we could no more have “holy solitaries” than we could have “holy adulterers.” Both expressions were simply contradictions in terms. In this same spirit, his early Methodist followers learned to sing, when gathered in the meeting of their societies at prayer:

Not in the tombs we pine to dwell,  
Not in the dark, monastic cell,  
By vows and grates confined;  
Freely to all ourselves we give,  
Constrained by Jesu’s love to live  
The servants of mankind.<sup>2</sup>

That verse is taken from the 1780 Hymn Book, from the section entitled “For the Society, Praying,” and exemplifies the outgoing nature of the early Methodist understanding of the Christian life: involved in the community, active in good works, and totally opposed to the monastic ideal of withdrawal and separation from the world. Yet it is not impossible that Wesley’s understanding of holiness was to some degree influenced by the monastic ideal, even if only by its orientation to a life wholly devoted—in study, manual labour and prayer—to the glory and praise of God.

Monsignor Ronald Knox, in his study, *Enthusiasm*, has an interesting comment on John Wesley’s spirituality. He wrote:

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<sup>1</sup>*The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley MA.*, ed. John Telford, 8 vols, (London: Epworth Press, 1931), III:238.

<sup>2</sup>*The Methodist Hymn Book* (1904), 599, v. 4.

I confess I cherish the belief that there was in Wesley something of the mystic; that his bent, if Providence had not seen fit to order his career otherwise, was towards a solitary, a contemplative life. He almost admits as much in the well-known letter he writes to his brother Charles in 1772: 'Vitae me redde priori! Let me be again an Oxford Methodist. I am often in doubt whether it would not be best for me to resume all my Oxford rules, great and small. I did then walk closely with God, and redeem the time. But what have I been doing these thirty years?' It is difficult to see how a man who lived as Wesley lived could write such words without affectation, unless he meant that his crowded years denied him.<sup>3</sup>

In the spirit of Knox's speculation about the possible attraction of the contemplative life for Wesley, I have often wondered whether the physical remains of English monasticism—the ruined houses that were left by Henry VIII's dissolution—may not have had some influence on the young Wesley, albeit perhaps unconscious. Certainly, his childhood and youth brought him into contact with the "bare, ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang," to borrow Shakespeare's marvellous line. In Epworth, within sight of the Rectory, were the remains of a Carthusian priory, as Dom David Knowles records in his magisterial history, *The Religious Orders in England*.<sup>4</sup> The Carthusians were the most austere of the religious orders in England, and unlike some others, they retained their purity and dedication down to the Reformation. Their austerity was signalled by their addition of a vow of silence to the threefold commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience.

When he left Epworth, the young Wesley went to school at Charterhouse in London, whose building had once been the mother-house of the Carthusian Order in England. When Henry VIII broke with the papacy, the monks of the London Charterhouse would not accept the new order, but died to a man at Tyburn. It can only be a surmise, of course, but I think it possible that the double impact of these historical remains of the Carthusian Order may have impressed on the mind of the young Wesley something of the beauty of holiness in the call to the religious life.

Interestingly, the Carthusians, in their rule of life, combined, in a quite outstanding way, the solitary and communal life. At Mount Grace in Yorkshire, England, there are the most substantial remains of a Carthusian priory. It comprises a large cloister, with a sizable church for the choir offices. Yet, apart from communal worship, each monk lived a largely separate life. The cloister is punctuated with a series of small houses, each with a bedroom, living room/study, and small garden. In these houses, the monks worked, prayed, and studied in solitude. They even ate apart, as a lay brother brought each monk his meals at the appropriate time. Solitude and community were thus interwoven. John Wesley in his mature understanding of holiness opted decisively for the communal pattern, but there is more than a

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<sup>3</sup>R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm* (1950), 433.

<sup>4</sup>Two volumes. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948-1959).

suggestion that he also understood the call to solitude and silence.

We turn now to consider Wesley's insistence on Methodism's calling to propagate and embody what he calls "scriptural holiness," and his equally strong affirmation that the Christian faith knows "no holiness but social holiness." From his Oxford days Wesley was committed to seeking the holiness without which no one shall see the Lord, as he characteristically insisted. The key texts he found, in both Old and New Testaments, convinced him of the corporate, social nature of true holiness. It was, of course, profoundly personal, but it was emphatically not individualistic. In Leviticus 19:1-2, the people of Israel, as a nation, received the promise and calling, "You (plural) shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am Holy." Turning to the New Testament, in 1 Peter 2:9, Christians are exhorted to live up to their high calling in Christ, in the following terms: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." Moreover, in support of Wesley's social understanding of holiness, of a radical togetherness in Christ, as members one of another, it is surely significant that in the Greek New Testament, the adjective for holy (*hagios*) occurs over sixty times, and virtually always in the plural, with the sense of "holy people, saints." There is, in fact, one example of its use in the singular—"a holy person/saint," but that is the exception that proves the rule, because the phrase in which it occurs is inclusive, "every saint."

With this corporate emphasis in mind, what are we to understand, in its detailed outworking, by Wesley's phrase, "social holiness"? It may well suggest, to modern Christian ears, social action in the name of Christ, outreach and service in the community, or mission alongside the poor. Certainly, that is one aspect of its meaning, as we can see from Wesley's practice from the Holy Club onwards. At Oxford, he and his colleagues visited the prisoners in Oxford jail, ministered to the poor in their homes, and taught their children to read. Admittedly, that was before the Methodist movement began, but we can see the same pattern from the beginning of the open-air ministry and the formation of the first Methodist Society in Bristol in 1739.

On April 2, 1739, when Wesley preached in the open air for the first time he did so with extreme reluctance. In his own words, he "submitted to be more vile," in response to the pressing request of George Whitefield, whose effective open-air ministry among the miners of Kingswood, Bristol, Wesley had seen for himself. He was further persuaded by the Gospel accounts of Jesus' open-air ministry—his preaching by the Lake of Galilee, and his delivering of the Sermon on the Mount. These accounts convinced Wesley that "field preaching," so called, was biblical, indeed dominical, in its nature. The text he used for his first sermon in the open air suggests another motive that impressed him. He preached on Luke 4:17-18, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That text, drawn from Isaiah, was what Jesus read in the synagogue at Nazareth at the start of his own public ministry. It sounded the keynote for

all he was to do and say from then on. In the same way, Wesley's sermon at Bristol set the tone for the whole of his future evangelistic and pastoral ministry as the leader of the Methodist movement.

From that April sermon, new developments followed in rapid sequence. Wesley gathered together those who responded to his preaching into religious societies which met in houses in Nicholas and Baldwin Streets in the heart of old Bristol. The numbers soon outgrew the domestic setting, however, and by May 1739, Wesley had bought a small piece of land in the Horsefair on which a meeting-house, called the New Room, was soon built. It was to be used for preaching, prayer, and Bible study. For the sacrament of Holy Communion, these first Methodists would go to the nearby parish church, St. James in the Barton.

From the beginning, however, "good news for the poor" was not only preached at the New Room, but was also embodied in various forms of "social holiness." These included a school for poor children, a dispensary with free medicines for the poor, prison visiting, and the formation of a Stranger's Friend Society which was specifically for the benefit of those outside the Methodist Society. It did not matter who they were, if they had fallen on hard times—through illness, bereavement, or unemployment—they were to be visited and given practical help in their own homes. The Stranger's Friend Society collected monies from which the visitors could draw to provide food, clothing, and other practical household necessities. Wesley insisted that the poor and needy must be visited in their own homes. He contended that one reason why many rich or well-to-do people cared nothing for the poor was that they had never been inside a poor person's home, did not know how the poor lived, and had no firsthand experience of poverty themselves. He was highly critical of the rich as a class and once had the temerity to preach to a fashionable London congregation on a text from John the Baptist: "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3:7). One irate member of the congregation accosted Wesley afterwards and indignantly demanded to know how he dared preach such doctrine to an eminently respectable congregation. The man insisted that if Wesley were going to preach that sort of sermon, he should preach it to the riff-raff of Spitalfields, one of the poorest districts of the city. Wesley dissented, replying that if he had been preaching to the poor in Spitalfields, his text would have been, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:31).

Unlike so many of his wealthier contemporaries, Wesley did indeed have personal experience of poverty. The Epworth home in which he was brought up was rich in Christian faith and practice, but the family knew the pinch of poverty. It is well known that Samuel, the rector, was often in debt, and was once imprisoned for debt in Lincoln Castle. With a brood of children to feed and clothe, Susanna the mother was often hard pressed to make ends meet. When Matthew Wesley, Samuel's brother, came home from India, where he had spent many years as a merchant, he went to Epworth to visit the family.

He was appalled at what he found in the rectory: the shabby state of the household furniture; the poor clothes of the children; and the generally poverty-stricken appearance of the home. He gave the parents much needed financial help, but at the same time took his brother Samuel to task with a severe lecture on his irresponsibility in bringing so large a family into the world and yet not being able to support them in a decent state of life. So, John Wesley had some early personal experience of poverty. Nor did that experience end with childhood. As Methodist leader and travelling evangelist, he lived on a modest £28 a year, and on his perpetual journeys had to rely on the hospitality of his colleagues and followers. When a well-to-do and rather cynical critic asked Wesley if he really knew anything about the poor, for whom he expressed such apostolic concern, Wesley replied that he had many times stayed in the homes of the poor, many times slept in the beds of the poor, and many times acquired fleas of the poor. It is typical of his attitude that, in the bitter winter of 1747, he should have urged the stewards of the London Methodist Society, "Put yourself in the place of every poor man, and deal with him as you would God should deal with you."

"Social holiness" for Wesley included a down-to-earth ministry aimed at supplying the pressing material needs of the poor—their lack of food, shelter, medical attention, and education. Yet it did not end there. Wesley was also deeply concerned for their spiritual needs—their want of forgiveness, hope, new life, redemption. He found often that the physically poor were also the spiritually poor, a truth also featured in Charles Wesley's hymns. In an echo of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, Charles celebrated the work of the Lord in the Methodist movement:

He hath opened a door  
To the penitent poor,  
And rescued from sin,  
And admitted the harlots and publicans in;  
They have heard the glad sound,  
They have liberty found  
Through the blood of the Lamb,  
And plentiful pardon in Jesus's name.<sup>5</sup>

Those who were both physically and spiritually poor were often encountered by the early Methodist in their prison ministry. Charles Wesley, Sarah Peters, and Silas Told, among others, were engaged in this ministry in London's Newgate prison. There is a vivid and detailed account of this ministry in John Wesley's journal for November 13, 1748.<sup>6</sup> It describes the conversion of some prisoners, and notably that of John Lancaster, who, like so

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<sup>5</sup>*Methodist Hymn Book* (1933), 262 v.3.

<sup>6</sup>*The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition (BE), (1975-) Vol.20, *Journal and Diaries III*, (1743-1754), ed. W. Reginald and R. P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 259.

many convicted of crimes of petty theft, was condemned to hang at Tyburn Tree, the great gallows which stood where Marble Arch stands today. The huge crowds which gathered for these public executions were accustomed to the condemned felons saying a last word, even if it were only a curse or a blasphemy. They must have astonished by John Lancaster's behavior as he met his death. John Wesley recorded the scene:

As they went along he (Lancaster) spoke to the people, exhorting them to repentance. To some he said, 'Ye poor creatures, you do not know where I am going. See that you love Christ, see that you follow Christ, and then you will come there too.' He likewise gave out and sung several hymns, particularly that with which he was always deeply affected:

Lamb of God, whose bleeding love,  
 We still recall to mind,  
 Send the answer from above,  
 And let us mercy find.  
 Think on us, who think on thee,  
 And every struggling soul release!  
 O remember Calvary;  
 And let us go in peace.

All the people who saw them seemed to be amazed; but much more when they came to the place of execution. A solemn awe overwhelmed the whole multitude. As soon as the executioner had done his part with Lancaster and the two that were with him, he [Lancaster] called for a hymn-book and gave out a hymn with a clear, strong voice. And after the ordinary had prayed, he gave out and sung the fifty-first Psalm. He then took leave of his fellow-sufferers with all possible marks of the most tender affection. He blessed the person who had attended him, and commended his own soul to God.

The hymn echoes the words of the dying thief to Jesus on the Cross, "Remember me, when you come into your kingdom." The 18th-century dying thief begs Jesus, "O remember Calvary"—where you too were executed in public, in company with the thieves.

So much, then, for the social outreach dimension of "social holiness." So far the concept might seem to have some resemblance to 20th-century Liberation Theology in its concern for the poor and marginalized and in its active compassion in helping them. Methodist "social holiness" lacked the sharp political edge of Liberation Theology apart from Wesley's outspoken support for the campaign against the slave trade, but at another level the two movements may be compared. Liberation Theology stands not only for social action and political concern, but also for a pattern of Christian discipleship fostered in the small group, gathered around the Scriptures and seeking to be built up in faith by discerning God's will for them in their community, and acting upon it.

At this point, we draw nearer to another dimension of Wesley's "social holiness," namely his insistence that growth in grace and Christian character is not an individualistic exercise in soul culture, but sharing together with

others, building one another up in the faith, an exploration of what it means to be members together in Christ. For Wesley and his followers, this mutual upbuilding, this deepening of fellowship and *koinonia*, took place pre-eminently in the small committed group—the band-meeting, the class meeting, or the society, where this was reasonably small in size. This small group, when well led, encouraged frankness and honesty among its members.

Too often, as Wesley observed, the quest for holiness could lead to self-deception or Pharisaism. A person could complacently assume that he or she was making good progress in the Christian life, yet be unaware of faults and weakness which hindered genuine growth in grace. The Rules of the Band Societies, which Wesley drew up on December 25, 1738, reveal how searching the experience of mutual sharing was intended to be. The question to be asked of each member included.

Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?.

Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home? . . .

Is it your desire and design to be on this and all other occasions entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart, without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?<sup>7</sup>

Wesley was clear that every one needed a candid friend, and in the bands and classes the early Methodists could find those who would fulfill that role, for their mutual benefit. Yet if being prepared to be told your faults and shortcoming was one side of the “social holiness” program of the small groups, another, equally vital, was the positive encouragement to good works and building each other up in the Christian virtues. In the Directions given to the Band Societies, dated December 25, 1744, Wesley urged the members:

. . . zealously to maintain good works, in particular,

1 To give alms of such things as you possess, and that to the uttermost of your power.

2 To reprove all that sin in your sight, and that in love, and meekness of wisdom.

3 To be patterns of diligence and frugality, of self-denial, and taking up the cross daily.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, the hymns of Charles Wesley provide a rich vein of material for the understanding of “social holiness” in terms of mutual upbuilding. It became proverbial in the early days of the Wesleyan movement, that “The Methodists go to heaven in companies” and the classic hymns describe the essentially corporate nature of their Christian pilgrimage. Typical of this emphasis in the hymns is “All praise to our redeeming Lord,” a hymn which

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<sup>7</sup>*The Works of John Wesley* (BE), 9:79.

<sup>8</sup>*The Works of John Wesley* (BE), 9:77-78.

*The Methodist Hymn Book* (1933) includes in the section for “Lovefeast and Covenant Services.” It begins:

All praise to our redeeming Lord,  
Who joins us by His grace,  
And bids us, each to each restored,  
Together seek His face.

He bids us build each other up;  
And, gathered into one,  
To our high calling’s glorious hope,  
We hand in hand go on.<sup>9</sup>

Mention of the Covenant Service may remind us that, although Wesley was indebted to the Puritans for his service for the Renewal of our Covenant with God, he made significant alterations to its content and ethos. Whereas the Puritans emphasised the Covenant as a solemn personal act of commitment by the individual Christian, Wesley made it a characteristically corporate act of renewal.

In *The Methodist Hymn Book* section on “Christian Fellowship” we find, naturally enough, the theme of “social holiness” strongly represented in Charles’ hymns, especially in relation to mutual support, encouragement, and edification. To take a typical example:

Let us join—’tis God commands  
Let us join our hearts and hands;  
Help to gain our calling’s hope,  
Build we each the other Up.<sup>10</sup>

In this same section there is included the hymn which Charles wrote specially for his betrothal in marriage to Sarah Gwynne. It has been slightly adapted, so that the mutual commitment of man and wife now relates to the wider theme of Christian fellowship and belonging together in Christ. Charles wrote:

Did Thou not make us one,  
That we might one remain,  
Together travel on,  
And bear each other’s pain;  
Till all thy utmost goodness prove,  
And rise renewed in perfect love?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>*The Methodist Hymn Book*, 745, vv. 1 and 2. Hereafter, *MHB*.

<sup>10</sup>*MHB*, 713, v.1.

<sup>11</sup>*MHB*, 716, v.3.

The aim of Christian fellowship is “perfect love,” Christian perfection, or scriptural holiness, to use John Wesley’s synonyms. Yet this quest for holiness is to be pursued together, in the closest fellowship and *koinonia*. Two further examples, out of many that might be cited on this theme from Charles’ hymns may suffice:

Help us to help each other, Lord,  
Each other’s cross to bear,  
Let each his friendly aid afford,  
And feel his brother’s care.

Help us to build each other up,  
Our little stock improve;  
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,  
And perfect us in love.<sup>12</sup>

And finally from “Lift up your hearts to things above”:

O let us stir each other up,  
Our faith by works to approve,  
By holy, purifying hope,  
And the sweet task of love.<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, it would be rash to claim that Wesley’s early Methodists always lived up to the twin ideals involved in “social holiness.” They did not. Yet there is abundant testimony to the fact that the structures of early Methodism which John Wesley devised, together with the inspiration of Charles’ hymns, did enable them to make genuine progress, both in caring outreach to the community and growth in grace through shared fellowship in the small group. Moreover, it is arguable that the two aspects of “social holiness” are vitally related. That is, if Christians are to be involved in costly action in the community in Christ’s name, meeting human need in its often raw state, then they will need to be sustained and upheld in group experience, through the support, prayer, and encouragement of their fellow-Christians. Certainly, that is a lesson to be gleaned from Liberation Theology and the base communities of Christians in Latin America. I believe it is also an inference warranted by the study of early Methodism. The contemporary church would do well to heed it if it is to bear fruit in what the Wesleys contended is the only form of holiness that belongs to the Gospel of Christ—“social holiness.”

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<sup>12</sup>*MHB*, 717, vv. 1 and 2.

<sup>13</sup>*MHB*, 722, v.4.