

MISSION IN METHODIST PERSPECTIVE SOME PERSONAL DELIBERATIONS

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Methodism began as a missionary movement in the eighteenth century. John and Charles Wesley, two Anglican priests trained and educated in Oxford were the charismatic leaders of this movement. They were brothers, sons of an Anglican priest, Samuel, and his wife Susanna. Both wanted to be missionaries to the Native Americans in America. They spent some time in Georgia but had few opportunities to meeting native people. John Wesley gave a short account in his *Journal* of a conversation with the Indian chief Tomichichi in Georgia on February 14, 1736. The *Journal* quotes Tomochichi's greeting to Wesley:

I am glad you are come. When I was in England I desired that some would speak the *Great Word* to me. And my nation then desired to hear it. But now we are all in confusion. Yet I am glad you are come. I will go up and speak to the wise men of our nation. And I hope they will hear. But we would not be made Christians as the Spaniards make Christians. We would be taught before we are baptized.¹

For the Wesleys it became clear that in mission no violence should be involved. The key text that supported the Roman Catholic mission in the Americas by the Conquistadors was Luke 14:23 in the story of the great supper where the Master after the many excuses of his invited guest says to his servants: Go out on the streets and bring in whomever you meet and “compel them to come in.” This phrase “compel them to come in” was interpreted as justifying the use of violence to make people disciples of Christ. With this mission concept John Wesley was confronted in meeting the Indian chief Tomichichi. What myriads of blood were shed in the name of our savior, Jesus Christ! John Wesley comments in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* on Luke 14:23: “With all the violence of love, and the force of God’s Word. Such compulsion, and such only, in matters of religion, was used by Christ and His apostles.”² In his sermon on enthusiasm he follows this line by saying:

Do not imagine that God has called you . . . to destroy men’s lives, and not to save them. Never dream of forcing men into the ways of God. Think yourself and let think. Use no constraint in matters of religion. Even those who are farthest out of the way never “compel to come in” by any other means than reason, truth, and

¹ *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 18, *Journals and Diaries* (1735-1738), W. Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 149.

² John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press [Frank H. Cumbers], 258); henceforth cited as *Notes*.

love.³

These insights are still valid. Who ever is engaged in mission, this person should know and take to heart that the only means in trying to win people for God's kingdom are reason, truth, and love.

The second point is the way Wesley related his missionary enterprise to the established church in England and to later Methodists to other churches. According to Dr. Albert C. Outler's brilliant address, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?", John Wesley's conversion experience at Aldersgate was just one important step in his spiritual development. He discovered his true vocation in Bristol, almost a year later, when he reluctantly accepted the invitation of George Whitefield to take over his mission of preaching in the open air. Wesley preached at several places around Bristol where thousands of people gathered eagerly listening and apparently hearing the gospel in his preaching. Lives were changed. The revival has begun. John Wesley himself was changed through this experience. Professor Outler sums this up by saying:

Up to this point the story is full of anxiety, insecurity, [and] futility. Hereafter, the instances of spiritual disturbances drop off sharply and rarely recur, even in the full records of a very candid man At Aldersgate he had passed from virtual to real faith, from hoping to having. Edwards and Whitefield had shown him that the word rightly preached bears visible fruit. And now, before his eyes, was a harvest of such fruit. What happened was that he had preached faith until others had it, and now his own was confirmed by theirs! For the next half-century, in failure and triumph, tumult and peace, obloquy and fame, the picture rarely varies: a man with an overmastering mission, acutely self-aware but rarely ruffled, often in stress but always secure on a rock-steady foundation.⁴

Before Wesley began his preaching in the open air he wrote a letter to a former Oxford Methodist colleague, the Rev. John Clayton, who has criticized him for "intermeddling in another's office" and "assembling Christians who are none of [your] charge to sing psalms and pray and hear the Scriptures expounded thinking it hard to justify doing this in other men's parishes, upon catholic principles." Wesley answered:

Permit me to speak plainly. If by *catholic* principles you mean any other than *scriptural*, they weigh nothing with *me*. I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures. But on scriptural principles I do not think it hard to justify whatever I do. God in Scripture commands me, according to my power, to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Men forbid me to do this in another's parish; that is, in effect, to do it at all. Whom then shall I hear? God or man? "If it be just to obey man rather than God, judge you." (Acts 5:29) "A dispensation of the gospel is committed to me, and woe is me if I preach not the gospel." (1 Cor. 9:16-19) But where shall I preach it upon the principles you mention? Why, not in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America; not in any of the Christian parts, at least, of the habitable earth. For all these are, after a sort, divided into parishes. If it be said, "Go back then to the heathens from whence you came," nay, but neither could

³ *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, Sermons II, Albert Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 59.

⁴ Albert Outler, *John Wesley*, Albert Outler, ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1964), 17-18.

I now (on your principles) preach to them; for all the heathens in Georgia belong to the parish either of Savannah or Fredricia. Suffer me now to tell you *my* principles in this matter. I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to. And sure I am that his blessing attends it. Great encouragement have I therefore to be faithful in fulfilling the work he hath given me to do. His servant I am, and as such am employed (glory be to him) day and night in his service.⁵

Wesley shows the universality of the gospel. The gospel is meant to be shared with everybody, “for God so loved the *world*, that he gave his only begotten Son . . .” (John 3,16). But at the same time the respect of the freedom of the individual person is expressed: “. . . all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation.” No attempt to manipulate or overrun the listener. Wesley had to defend this position against critics almost all his life, but his position was clear. He argued in support of his lay assistants’ and his role: we are “. . . messengers of God to those who are Christians in name but heathens in heart and life, to call them back to that from which they are fallen, to real, genuine Christianity.”⁶ He could answer clerical protests that this involved the invasion of other men’s parishes by pointing to his own collegiate ordination in Oxford which has given him an extra parochial license. This license he extended to his lay preachers—for preaching and teaching only, not for the administration of the sacraments.⁷

Methodist preachers in all European countries were not believed that they just wanted to call people from a state of unbelief to “real, genuine Christianity.” In all European countries, church territories have been defined and divided into parishes so the approach of Methodist preachers was considered more or less as invasion. But Methodism was never interested in expanding church territories, it never owned such. Methodism existed and lived by the love of many individual persons who have experienced the joy of being saved by God’s love and grace and having received new life in forgiveness of sins and then were living to God in holiness and righteousness all the days of their life.⁸ By preaching the gospel regardless of church territories or parishes they reminded the established or national churches that having defined church territories and parishes this doesn’t say anything about the need of the people or the spiritual quality of their lives. The thousands of miners who flocked to hear John Wesley preach didn’t care about parishes. They never were in church before and were totally estranged from the church.

There is another important aspect I want to mention. It was never a tendency in Methodism to condemn or judge other religious groups or churches.

⁵ *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 25, Letters I, 1721-1739, Frank Baker, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 615-616.

⁶ John Wesley, *A Preservative Against Unsettled Notions in Religion* (1758), quoted by Albert Outler in *John Wesley*, Albert Outler, ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1964), 20.

⁷ Outler observed, “Wesley seems to have held the view that his Oxford ordination conferred on him the *ius ubique praedicandi*, the right of preaching everywhere” (Outler, *John Wesley*, 21).

⁸ See Luke 1:75.

In the *Large Minutes* the question was raised: Are we not Dissenters? And the answer was:

No: although we call sinners to repentance in all places of God's dominion: and although we frequently use extemporary prayer, and unite together in a religious society; yet we are not Dissenters in the only sense which our law acknowledges, namely, those who renounce the service of the Church. We do not, we dare not, separate from it. We are not Seceders, nor do we bear any resemblance to them. We set out upon quite opposite principles. The Seceders laid the very foundation of their work in judging and condemning others; we laid the foundation of our work in judging and condemning ourselves. They begin every where with showing their hearers how fallen the Church and ministers are: we begin every where with showing our hearers how fallen they are themselves.⁹

In this spirit Wesley wrote and talked about the Church, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. In his sermon "Of the Church" (1785) he says: "The catholic or universal church is all the persons in the universe whom God has so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be 'one body,' united by 'one spirit'; having 'one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all.'"¹⁰ In his understanding of the church believers in dissenting churches and even in the Roman-catholic church were not excluded. Wesley lived and showed an ecumenical attitude and spirit long before the ecumenical movement began.

My third point is Wesley's relation to the world. In the memorial service after the death of John Wesley which the Rev. Dr. Thomas Coke held in Baltimore on May 1, 1791, and in Philadelphia on May 8, 1791, he summed up his detailed description of the immense work and contribution to the church universal Wesley has made with the Latin phrase *Wesley contra mundum* Wesley against the World.¹¹ Wesley was not interested to bring individual parishes to new life (church growth programs would not have been supported by him because too much self centered) but saw his task to bring the gospel to the world. It makes a big difference if one looks at the world as his or her area of work or if your congregation and your church is your world. In the *Large Minutes* the question was raised, "What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the preachers called Methodists?" And the answer given was: "Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation,

⁹ "Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and others; from the year 1744 to the year 1789," *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, Third American Complete and Standard Edition from the latest London Edition with the last corrections of the Author by John Emory, vol. V (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1853), 227.

¹⁰ *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, Sermons III, Albert Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 50.

¹¹ Quoted by Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley, Band II, Das Lebenswerk John Wesleys* (Zürich: Gotthelf-Verlag, 1966), 413. This phrase was used in the old church to describe the role of bishop Athanasius. John Wesley himself uses this phrase in one of his last letters (February 24, 1791) to Wilberforce encouraging him to go on in his fight against slavery.

particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”¹² The bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury who published the *Discipline* of 1798 with explanatory notes used this phrase from the *Large Minutes* in their preface with a slight change. They wrote: “We humbly believe that God’s design in raising up the preachers called Methodists, in America, was to reform the continent, and spread scripture-holiness over these lands.”¹³ They changed “nation” into “continent” and dropped the words “particularly the Church” because there was no church anymore, no established church in the new republic, but holiness was still at stake. Both clearly understood what they were called to and what their task was. The General Rules can be seen as an example how Wesley helped his people to live in this world a holy life:

First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced Secondly: By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as possible, to all men Thirdly: By attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are: The public worship of God. The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded, The Supper of the Lord. Family and private prayer. Searching the Scriptures. Fasting or abstinence.¹⁴

All three rules belong essentially together, none can be lived and practiced without the other. There is always a tendency in human beings to pick out one of the rules and push the others in the background thus avoiding the tension that exists between these rules. But this tension is the heartbeat of Christian life.

An eighty year old John Wesley wrote a sermon in 1783 on Isaiah 11:9: “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” Later the sermon was given the title “The General Spread of the Gospel.” In this sermon Wesley expresses the hope that what God has done to individuals; he can do to nations also. “Now in the same manner as God has converted so many to himself without destroying their liberty, he *can* undoubtedly convert whole nations or the whole world.”¹⁵ John Wesley was convinced that “the holy lives of the Christians will be an argument they [the Muslims and other non-Christians] will not know how to resist; seeing the Christians steadily and uniformly practice what is agreeable to the law written in their own hearts, their prejudices will quickly die away, and they will gladly receive “the truth as it is in Jesus” (cf. Eph. 4:21).¹⁶ Whatever

¹² “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and others; from the year 1744 to the year 1789,” *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, Third American Complete and Standard Edition from the latest London Edition with the last corrections of the Author by John Emory, vol. V (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1853), 212.

¹³ *The Methodist Discipline of 1798 including the Annotations of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury*, facsimile ed. Frederick Norwood, ed. (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1979), III.

¹⁴ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 72-74.

¹⁵ *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, Sermons II, Albert Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 490.

¹⁶ *The Works of John Wesley*, 496.

we might think about Wesley's vision no one will deny that the world and each nation in it needs people whose lives are determined by "experimental knowledge and love of God, by inward and outward holiness."¹⁷ At least John Wesley had great expectations toward God, and he taught his people to expect much from God. The General Rules are misunderstood if they are not seen in the light of one sentence in the opening paragraph defining Methodist societies as "a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness."¹⁸ Still, every person on the way to ordained ministry who wants to become a member of an Annual Conference will be asked the question: "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?"¹⁹ It is a kind of tragedy that this question was inaccurately translated in the German translation of the *Discipline*. Almost until the end of the twentieth century the question, translated back into English, read "Do you expect to become perfect in love in this life?" The biblical supported expectation toward God was omitted. How much of such expectation toward God is still alive in our church? Do you expect anything from God? Or do you consider yourself a selfmade person in every aspect?

Since General Conference 1996 the phrase of "making disciples" is used in defining the role of the local church and the whole church as such. Here again translation is misleading. "Making disciples" communicates an understanding as if it is our doing; as we make money and make cars so we make disciples. In 1999, I wrote a little study on "making disciples." I quote from that work:

Scripture is clear that this change is accomplished by God. In John 3:3, Jesus speaks about being born again. John Wesley comments: "In this solemn discourse, our Lord shows that no external profession, no ceremonial ordinances, or privileges of birth, could entitle any to the blessings of the Messiah's kingdom: that an entire change of heart, as well as of life, was necessary for that purpose; that this could only be wrought in man by the almighty power of God." And in 2 Corinthians 5:17, where Paul speaks about the new creation that happens within those who are in Christ Jesus, Wesley comments: "There is a new creation—only the Power that makes a world can make a Christian."

John Wesley could clearly distinguish between what only God can do and what we as believers and followers of Jesus are called to do. In the preface of his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* he informs the reader on what principles he has translated and which other theologians he has consulted and quoted, he also mentions how scripture was used to "inflame the hearts of Christians against each other." And then he describes a touching ecumenical vision, "Would to God that all the party names and unscriptural phrases and forms which have divided the Christian world were forgot, and that we all agree to sit down together, as humble, loving disciples, at the feet of our common Master, to hear His word, to imbibe His spirit, and to tran-

¹⁷ *The Works of John Wesley*, 493.

¹⁸ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 72.

¹⁹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008*, 235.

scribe His life in our own!"²⁰

I think that we still can learn much from our father in faith, John Wesley.

²⁰ *Notes*, 8.