

Living the 2nd Commandment in a Multi-cultural context

A Paper written for the Practical Theology, Worship, and Spirituality

Working Group.

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The World Church

It has been a fresh yet different challenge moving back to the urban area of Sydney after twenty years and now serving in two congregations. In those past years I served with my family a full term – five years, as mission partners with the World Church in Britain Partnership programme. As a minister at Wesley Methodist Church, High Wycombe Circuit, we were encouraged by the reasons why churches in Britain need overseas mission partners, to:

- enable mutuality of mission (to be mutual)
- celebrate diversity and difference
- encourage a sense of equality rather than one being superior
- address racism in Society
- a reminder that we all belong to one family
- taking risks in developing relationships

Meeting on a regular basis with other mission partners and their families for consultations and retreats, we shared food, games, dancing, singing, worship and communion together. The great variety of music, dancing, language and the rich styles and colours of cultural costumes and customs, and of course food, had a message of its own about the Wesleyan communities and beyond.

This is a discussion of the impact of the Wesleyan spirit in a Pacific Island context and how the gospel continually challenges through the cultural practice of exchanging food to an extended hospitality. It reflects critically upon the movement from the routine of a traditional way of caring for one another into an exploration of loving your neighbour.

Sabbath Day

Early in the 19th century in the colonies, Sabbath-breaking, together with drunkenness, adultery, blasphemy and gambling were the great concerns of the Sydney Wesleyans. This caused them to plead with the Wesleyan Missionary Committee in London for a preacher – ‘a faithful servant of the Lord.’¹ Methodists protested against ‘Sabbath desecration,’ or the misuse of Sunday. Sunday for them was ‘the Lord’s Day,’ to be kept as a time for public worship and religious activities and for rest. Methodists were expected to refrain from all sport and work, including church business meetings. Buying and selling were forbidden, except medicine for the sick or necessities for funerals.

Methodists, over the years were appalled at the situation and glad to be exhorted constantly to avoid those and other sins to which they had little inclination and to maintain a high standard of personal ethics. They sought, by faithful witness, to remedy the situation and were pleased when the proclamation of the gospel did transform human lives and change communities as when it was claimed in mid 19th century for one of the regions of New South Wales that ‘The character of the whole neighbourhood has altogether changed ...and religion *alone* has done it.’²

Many Methodists were Sabbatarians who believed that the biblical legislation dealing with the Jewish Sabbath in the Ten Commandments was transferred to the Christian Sunday. Many took this action because they believed it was in the best interests of all members of the community – it gave them an opportunity for

¹ Don Wright and Eric Clancy, *The Methodists A History of Methodism in NSW*, Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 1993. p.93.

² *Ibid.*, p. 93

rest and refreshment after long hours of toil during the week. The day when the working man put away his working tools and fishing equipment and was given a place and a voice and made aware of his dignity as child of God.

Many stories have been told of judgement on Sabbath breakers. One story from Tonga was about two boys who skipped Sunday School on a Sunday and took off to get mangoes from the neighbour's tree. The one who climbed to pick the fruits, fell off the tree, and he became paralysed for the rest of his life. He became a constant reminder for all the village kids to keep Sunday holy for God. Another story from Australia, about a Methodist preacher who spent Saturday night with a friend for his Sunday morning service at a remote area where Canberra is now located. At the breakfast table Gale mentioned that he had taken an early morning walk in the garden. 'What! Have you been walking in my garden on the Sabbath?' was the stern and unexpected response, 'That's Sabbath-breaking. I allow no one in my garden on Sundays.'³

As being the main mission station for Methodist Churches of the south Pacific in the 19th century, the New South Wales Conference had a great impact in the Pacific churches, Tonga included. The winds of change dramatically transformed the island into a Christian nation since the Pentecost of Tonga in early 1830s. The continuing influence of the gospel and of the missionaries was evident in the Tongan Constitution (1975) which declared the Sabbath Day to be kept 'sacred in Tonga forever.'⁴

The observance of the Sunday has become a great cornerstone for Tongan families nationally to this day. Saturday in the Tongan language – 'Aho Tokonaki means 'Preparation Day', making Saturday, a day dedicated to preparing for the Lord's Day. A day that people set aside especially for preparing their best attire to wear and special meals for the families to have and share with their

³ Ibid., p. 98

⁴ Sione Lātūkefu, Church and State in Tonga, Australian National University Press, 1974, p. 206

neighbours. Hence the Lord's Day is known as the day of rest from unnecessary duties. This made Sunday very special, and the overflow of hospitality and exchanging plates of food at lunch time became part of Sunday customs. So the impact of the Wesleyan spirit infiltrates the community life in the islands and draws cultural practices into extended hospitality.

Hospitality

Hospitality has a religious meaning and it became a form of the Lord's Day cultural practices to which sharing food became the essential part of it. Even though food for a long long time was a constant concern for every family, it also became the main conversational topic for many Tongans, like the weather for the Brits. Food can be a relaxing and expected beginning of daily conversations – 'Did you have a good feed today? Did you have a good Sunday?' This means – Did you have a good Sunday meal? A 'good day,' normally is associated with good food. Food allows people to talk to and with each other, and food becomes the medium for developing friendship and fellowship.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1996) defines 'hospitality' as the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests or strangers. This practice was common in ancient Israel and is referred to in several places in the Hebrew Bible, notably in Abraham's hospitality to the 'three men' in Genesis 18:1-5. In many parts of the Islands of Tonga, the visiting preachers receive hospitality and they send him/her back with a '*green basket* (coconut leaves basket, freshly woven filled with choices of cooked food).'

An English couple were worried about their first trip to Tonga for the Methodist Conference 2000. They did not receive much contact from the Church Office before they left. We urged them, 'just go, they will look after you.' That's exactly what happened. They came back absolutely overwhelmed with the hospitality they received.

Entertainment is also an essential part of hospitality in the Islands' culture. It has an important part in the infusion of warmth and a joyous spirit of the occasion. Hospitality and entertainment can be powerful tools for mission as well as bring people of all backgrounds together.

Family

In the beginning of his chapter on The Family, in his book *Methodist Spirituality*, Wakefield states that as heirs of Puritanism, the Methodists constantly stressed the importance of family life and household being the nursery of the church.⁵

As Tonga was predominantly Methodist in the first century of Methodism (since 1820s), Christian marriage and family life were moulded and gradually changed by the teaching of the Methodist missionaries. There was good advice about the choices for marriage partners as was mentioned by Dr Walsh in his essay on Methodism at the end of the eighteenth century, 'Methodists married Methodists,' as in St Paul's injunction to the Corinthians, "be not unequally yoked with unbelievers."⁶ This was the marriage trend at the time and grew stronger when the Catholics and other denominations arrived on Tonga's shores. Some noble families were over protective of their own circles, by banishing any non Methodist denomination that asked for their church to be built on their land. This began a new community framework, influencing and forming a new way of living and relating to one other within family and community. So your next-door neighbour was not just a member of the extended family, but a member of the Methodist family.

From Island Hospitality to Loving cross-culturally

In spite of his great sermon on The Use of Money – 'Gain all you can; Save all you can; Give all you can.' Wesley did not think that Christians should covet or become excessively wealthy. His heart was always for the poor to which he gave

⁵ Gordon S. Wakefield, *Methodist Spirituality: Exploring Methodism*, Epworth Press, 1999, p. 46

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46

generously. He had memories of the financial struggles in the Rectory at Epworth. His heart for charitable giving aimed to preserve the dignity of the poor. Not keeping remote or impersonal but sort out the forming relationships. ‘How much better it is , to carry relief to the poor, rather than to send it.’⁷

The overflowing hospitality among the Tongans was sometimes un-restricted and uncalculated. In many cases it could be a mixture of what Wesley mentioned in his sermon on The Nature of Enthusiasm – wholly activated by the power of God ...and ‘speak’ only as they were moved by the Holy Ghost or wholly sets this aside and shut the eyes of understanding. To which Wesley called ‘religious madness.’ It arises from some falsely imagined influence or inspiration of God.

In their annual Church ‘misinale’ (big money offering), a Tongan Uniting Church congregation of Western Sydney, Australia invited their neighbourhood to their Thanksgiving Feast afterwards. This is something they have done for several years. As a home church traditional practice, the congregation choose a prominent person to be the chair for the ‘misinale’. The minister leads the worship service, then followed by the giving of the ‘misinale’.

The families and groups are called upon to donate their money offering for the work of the Church, and place them on the altar. It is always offered with verbal statements of affirmation and commitment for God’s service, with singing being an inevitable part of it. There are also contributions on behalf of the named Church member, from friends and associates who are present at the service. In many cases, they collect a large amount of money in memory of a recent passing member of one’s family. After the announcement of the dedicated amount and the closure of the service, then everyone is invited to the hall for the feast. Long lines of speakers offer words of graditude, encouragement and dancing (if it’s not on a Sunday). This is the most united part of the ‘misinale’. The time for

⁷ Ibid., p. 27

everyone – the worshipers, invited and uninvited guests to sit together, this is in a cultural manner. There is always plenty of food for everyone to eat and everyone is encouraged to take the leftovers home.

This is what happens every year in this Western Sydney Tongan congregation. They warmly invite their neighbourhood to join them, especially to sit at the table and eat with them during their meal time. It is a cultural aspect enjoyed by those of the neighbourhood, be it Middle Eastern, Anglo and Aboriginal ethnic background. It was a gradual move for them to join the mealtime and make conversation, as they were hesitant to sit with the Church folk, so instead, at the beginning they would just pack food and return home. When they were told what the Church did prior to the feast, they understood and were more appreciative and willing to join everyone. When they were invited to take some food home, they would pack up and put them in their vehicles or walk across the street to take food home - some returned to the church to help clean up.

This is an extension of what happened back at home in the Islands. Hospitality is an essential part of Tongan culture, as in many other communities. This is what greatly overwhelmed Captain Cook in his visits to the Islands of Tonga in the early 1770s, eventually naming them The Friendly Islands.

'Nofo 'a kāinga' is the phrase used for the extended family, and the term *'kaunga'api'* or neighbour is concealed within the extended family. In other words, neighbour is understood in the context of an extension to your household. They are people like you, and are related to you. The saying goes *'alu mei fale ki fale'* which means, ' going from home to home.'

It is not unusual in this context that without asking for something from your neighbour, they give it to you, and before you invite them, they join you. I remember in Tonga making an *'umu* (underground oven) to cook food for a feast in honour of a relative who just returned from overseas after graduating from

University. As soon as our two neighbours heard the screaming of the pigs and seeing firewood and coconuts unloaded in our backyard, they came over with contributions of yams, tinned beef and some water melons. They came along not only to contribute to the occasion, but they also offered to help with the cooking. Without being formally invited, it's acceptable to join us as neighbours celebrating. So I would do the same for my neighbour during a special occasion of theirs.

My three young adults who were born in Australia, visited my hometown in Tonga recently, and were quite overwhelmed when they were welcomed and told, if you are hungry any time, just pop in to any of the households for food, for we are all family. How can this household attitude of extending hospitality be an adventure of loving neighbour in the Biblical sense? How can this be made a natural practice in a diverse and multicultural setting?

Loving God enables the neighbour to be seen

This communal and local life-style was enlightened and enhanced by the teaching of the missionaries, especially in the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. Since 'loving God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves' is one of the key passages for Wesley's theology of Christian Perfection and Holiness, it's worth re-visiting the Lord's parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and the Christian's call to love one another (Romans 13:8-10.)

It shows that the Lawyer in Luke's story knew God's commandments, but he did not know God's love. It also seems that he did not love anyone, because the law does not tell him to love any specific person. So he asks Jesus a loaded question, "And who is my neighbour?"

Jesus defines a neighbour, not in a theological sense, but in a life situation. He defines it in a social relationship situation. Jesus proceeds to tell one of the most perfect short stories ever told:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among robbers who stripped him, beaten him and left him half dead. By chance a priest appeared, but he passed by on the other side; and later a Levite also passed by. Finally, a Samaritan, a half-bred from a people with whom the Jews had no dealings appeared. When he saw the wounded man he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, put him on his donkey, brought him to an Inn and took care of him.

Real love enables its neighbour to be seen especially in the most risky or dangerous situations. In the story, three people noticed the man in the ditch. The priest and the Levite looked at the wounded man and passed by. The Samaritan saw him and was moved with compassion. But did they see the same reality? If they did, why did they respond differently?

We should remember that this story was in the framework of the double commandment – to love God and love neighbour. In particular, this story explores the meaning of the second commandment – Love your neighbour as yourself. In this context, what the priest and the Levite saw was not themselves – ‘not me,’ wounded on the roadside. In contrast, the Samaritan saw himself – ‘me,’ on the roadside bleeding to death. That is why he was moved with compassion because *he* was the one in the ditch. Compassion in this sense means having the neighbour’s pain in your heart.

In essence, Jesus is saying, ‘I do not know the name of the wounded man, he could be one of the household members or extended family members or anyone who lies in need at life’s roadside. He is neither Jew nor Gentile, he is neither

Tongan nor aboriginal, he is neither Christian nor Muslim. He is a certain man, any needy person on one of the Jericho roads of life.

One of the great tragedies of human history that Martin Luther King Junior states in his powerful sermon on this parable⁸ has been the limiting of neighbourly concern to tribe, race, class and nation. The devastating consequences of this narrow group-centred attitude is that one does not really care what happens to the people outside his/her respective group.

In his sermon 'Catholic Spirit,' Wesley points out that love is due to all humankind. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,' is '*the royal law.*'⁹ The person of a catholic spirit is *united to one*, not only in spirit, but by all the outward ties of Christian fellowship including public prayer, Lord's Supper, public praise and thanksgiving. He rejoices to hear the word of reconciliation and the gospel of the grace of God. He watches over things in love and in every way building each other in the faith. He regards these as his household - to care for them and provide all the things they need for life and godliness.¹⁰

The heart of a man of a catholic spirit is enlarged *toward all humankind*, those he knows and those he does not know. He embraces with strong and cordial affection, neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love. For love alone gives the title to this character: catholic love is a catholic spirit.¹¹ This may enable us to discover that our neighbour and our enemy is probably the same person.

The hospitality offered by the Tongan congregation was in the context of worship and the service of 'misinale'. This means that the acts of giving in the 'misinale'

⁸ Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love*, Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1977, pp. 27ff.

⁹ Sermon xxxiv: Par. 1. The phrase occurs in an inscription of the time of Trajan, meaning a law promulgated by the Emperor...the imperial law. But more probably it means the supreme law, which controls all the rest. It carries its own message to all who hear it.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144, III par. 3

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145, III par. 4

and offering hospitality to the neighbourhood were acts of worshipping and thanksgiving for what God has done for them. This is what Wesley is saying that a man of a catholic spirit knows how to value, and praise God for all the advantages he enjoys and that is a true scriptural manner of worshipping Him.¹²

At the most radical level, the problem is that the neighbour is invisible and voiceless. In many cases, what we see is what we love. But how can our love listen and understand the heart that is yearning and longing for compassion and help?

An elderly man described to a BBC broadcaster in Poland how during the World War the railway tracks leading to Auschwitz passed through his village. As the train loaded with Jews went passed the houses, the men, women and children crammed into cattle trucks would scream at the top of their voices to draw attention to themselves, in the hopes of someone hearing their cries. The old man described how on the Sundays, when he was in church, as they heard the rattle of the carriages in the distance, coming nearer, the minister would tell everyone to sing louder. To drown the screams of the victims passing by, he would urge the congregation, 'Sing, sing, sing!'

Love is not deaf or blind. It can penetrate through seeing and hearing. Neighbourly love which flows from the love of God poured into our hearts enables our neighbour to be seen and heard. In other words, the co-loving of neighbour and the love of God means uncovering the uniqueness of others and responding to their needs. Paul Tillich once said that the first task of love is to listen. Or else, my Dutch friend used to say – 'A good listener needs only half a word.' Love listens and understands the heart which cries for help and responds to it.

¹² Ibid., p. 145, III par. 5

Manson reminds us that ‘some of the worst mischief in the world can be caused by people who set out to do good to their neighbours but do not love them.’¹³ Truly, love can take many forms; sometimes people are unwilling to receive gifts from people of another country or culture or religion, for in many cases it was given with a wrong attitude, based on pride. So love is needed by both the ‘giver,’ so that he may not adopt a superior or patronizing attitude; and by the ‘receiver,’ so he may be ready to humble himself and say, “Thank you!”

Who is my neighbour? In Romans 13:8, we can draw two definitions of neighbour: ‘Owe no one anything except to love one another – i) your *fellow believer*, for he who loves another – ii) your fellow *human being*, has fulfilled the law.’ To love one another cannot be applied in this context. The apostle is not limiting love here and that is why he goes on to refer to loving the neighbour/one another. The Greek text says, *the other* points to other person of whatever background.

The love of neighbour does not entail affectionate feelings. If that were the case, the category of neighbour would be constricted to friends or someone that we look like or share the same faith. The neighbour is simply the next person I meet. It could be the one next to you right now or the one who will stand with you in the queue in the supermarket next Thursday, but most significantly, the one in need.

Soren Kierkegaard sums it up in this way: “If there are only two men, the other man is the neighbour; if there are millions, each one of these is the neighbour.” Loving your neighbour as yourself, does not mean liking the same food or even eating in the same way with your neighbour. Loving your neighbour as yourself, does not mean believing or living the same life style that he/she lives. It does mean loving another human being with the love which has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit of God and in this way the law is fulfilled.

¹³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., U.K. 1988, p. 457

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Romans 13:8-14)

The text sets out the Christian attitude to all people. The Christian is to be a loving person. That is the principal characteristic of the people of God. ‘Owe no one anything, except to love one another.’ Apostle Paul urges his fellow believers not to continue owing, but to pay their debts. Then he moves on to the thought of a debt that cannot be discharged, the debt to love. As Origen (185-254AD) puts it; ‘The debt of charity is permanent, and we are never to quit of it; we must pay it daily and yet always owe it.’ This means, love is a permanent obligation, a debt impossible to discharge. Paul goes on to cite four of the Ten Commandments that correspond roughly to the night life of this pagan city. This means that if anyone loves – these commandments will be fulfilled: that person cannot commit adultery, murder, steal or covet. The apostle calls his fellow believers to love the people they actually meet day by day with all their faults. Then, comes the summary of these laws in the sentence: *You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*

What does this mean? Does this mean to love yourself and your neighbour? This is not so; self-love in the Scripture is a synonym for sin. It gives us no freedom to love others without a string. But on the other hand, agape-love means that sacrifice of oneself in the service of others. By its true nature it cannot be self-directed. How can we sacrifice ourselves to serve ourselves? This is impossible. The way of Christ is the opposite. He taught the great paradox that only when we lose ourselves for his sake do we find ourselves, and only through serving others that we ourselves are free to serve everyone regardless of their background.

Holiness beyond Methodism

Wakefield wrote of Donald Nicholl, a Roman Catholic layman and also Professor at Keele and California and Rector of the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research at Tantur, near Bethlehem. He was a catholic very much in the sense of Wesley's catholic spirit. In 1981, his book on 'Holiness' was published and the second edition came out six years later.

This book is not from the world of academia, or book of learning, but from Nicholl's life experience in many countries. It insists that holiness is for all, not just for a few spiritually gifted individuals. It draws its examples from many faiths, an amazing variety of sources from different periods of human history and many cultures. An Orthodox saint keeps company with a Muslim Imam, a mediaeval Jew, Tibetan Buddhist, a Japanese psychiatrist, victim of Auschwitz, or some person Nicholl has known or encountered. The quest is ecumenical in a sense wider than Wesley's in that, like Bernanos' country priest, he finds grace everywhere. Yet Holiness must draw us to the Holy One. Without a trace of Christian imperialism, the supreme instance is in the Christ of the incarnation and Calvary. Nicholl believed in him as the Way, the Truth and the Life, but believed that the unconditional love of God accepted in Christ opens up for us the treasures of other religions. The Passion, the one final sacrifice for the whole of creation, is inescapable. There is one unacknowledged quotation from a Wesley hymn, 'the wounds which all my sorrows heal' from 'With glorious clouds encompassed round'.¹⁴ There is reference to the Doctrine of the Trinity, the perfect union of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For the human person, holiness means sharing fully in that divine friendship.¹⁵ The eucharist is also inescapable. It is universality glimpsed in the sharing of food or tokens of food in other faiths.

Holiness is a gift to the dying thief on the cross. It was granted immediately, 'today' without any preparation. It should come connatural, not simply

¹⁴ Hymns & Psalms, No 153. See Hildebrandt's fine exposition in A Collection of Hymns, pp. 11ff

¹⁵ Donald Nicholl, Holiness, Darton - Longman + Todd, London, 1981, p. 38

supernatural knowledge, in accordance with nature and at home in the universe. Holiness grows from the performance of menial works – such as making tea for other and daily duties. Manual work seems essential to sanctity (Christ was a carpenter). ‘God longs for everyone of his creatures to be holy.’¹⁶

Stillness is necessary. There is a need to stop and be silent sometimes. We may hurry or talk God out of our lives, even in the way we eat our food. We need to learn the sabbath rest, be detached from those habits we think are wholly good or those spiritual exercises that dominate our lives. How Jesus prayed helps us to pray without ceasing, so that our prayer descends from the head to the heart. Daily life should be a spiritual exercise, but they should not remove us from concerns with the wider issues of society. One may need to abandon one’s present position in society, for the sake of the poor, as Mother Teresa did.

Surely, we need companions, friendship, community, a soul-friend, ‘some one who loves you so much that he will never allow you to stray from the path of holiness without both rebuking and encouraging you.’ The family and the church in some form are essential.

Arguably, the most important chapter in *Holiness* that is necessary for our quest to live out the 2nd Commandment in an increasing multicultural and multifaith context is on suffering; self-sacrifice. No one can become holy without being plunged into the mystery of suffering. Both St Paul and Mohammed thought that groaning was the state of the creation and, said Mohammed, one of the names of God. Nicholl refers to C.S.Lewis whose book *The Problem of Pain* seemed superficial, even to himself when he had suffered the grief of his wife’s death from cancer. Suffering is not a problem but a mystery. It takes the initiative out of our own hands. It may, as with Job, draw us ever deeper into the presence of God and of one another. Strangely, joy and suffering are not opposites:

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 116

Consequently if we ask ourselves, 'What is the very worst thing that could happen to me in this life?' the answer would have to be the complete opposite of the answer that worldly folk give. The worst thing that could happen to me in this life is that I should always have perfect health, always have interesting work and plenty of money to buy things and take holidays, and also manage somehow never to be brought into contact with suffering. If that were to happen to me I should be turned into a monster, something unnatural, incapable of compassion for other creatures. To be cut off from suffering is ultimately to be cut off from joy.¹⁷ But the sufferer like the unblemished lamb of the Jewish sacrifice must be pure and innocent.

This is a summary of a book which outlines the full scope of holiness and how it can be attained. We may learn the topic anew in a wider context, not only of Methodism and Christianity, but also of other world faiths. However, Methodists must be as open as Wesley to every manifestation of holiness, of the perfect love of God and neighbour, and seek the loss and discovery of self in Christ in caring for all humankind. Living the 2nd Commandment is a challenge yet an enriching experience of practicing how to be Christ to our neighbour in a multi-cultural and multi-faith society. It is a movement from the routine of the cultural practice of hospitality into an adventure of loving one another cross-culturally. It is a way of living and doing what the Lord said to his hearers, 'you go and do likewise.'

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 145