Experience of God

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The key to the Methodist passion and mission of John and Charles Wesley is to be found in their personal encounter with God, by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. The transformation that comes through this experience of God is both gift and response, a mystery and an expected outcome of obedience to the 'drawings of the Father' in and through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, all experience of God is meditated experience.

The early twenty-first century is clearly engaged in an active dialogue concerning the appropriate ways to understand and interpret accounts of spiritual experiences inherent in the major world religions (Boeve and Hemming, 2004; Coolman, 2004; Gellman, 2001; Hick, 2006; Schlitt, 2007); including the experience of God, the transcendent, or a 'transpersonal Reality', as John Hick suggests. Within the Christian tradition, Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall (2005) provide a postmodern response to the discussion of *The Experience of God*. Within the scientific community, Jensine Andresen (2001: 1)describes the birth of 'a new field and a new approach to understanding religion' involving scholars from varied disciplines 'willing to tackle … cognitive theories of religion in general and the neural bases of religion in specific' resulting in the emergence of a coherent area of research and writing she refers to as a 'cognitive science of religion'.

The basic grammar and definition of terms for this chapter will be drawn from Jerome I. Gellman's chapter on 'Mysticism and Religious Experience' in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Wainwright, 2005, 138-63). Mystical experiences are narrowly understood as 'A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual *unitive* experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection.' Religious experiences are normally more broadly understood, including religious visions, auditions, feeling of religious awe, sublimity, and Friedrich Schleiermacher's sense of 'absolute dependence'. Religious experiences can be numinous in the sense identified by Rudolph Otto as an encounter with one who is 'wholly other' than the subject, producing a sense of dread and fascination before an incomprehensible mystery. However, numinous experiences are not restricted to this definition (as shown by the critique of feminist philosophers, ibid. 162-3).

When an experience includes sense perception, Gellman calls it an *extrovertive* experience. When an experience is wholly non-sensory, it is *introvertive*. Union with God 'signifies a rich family of experiences rather than a single experience, it involves a falling away of the separation between the person and God, short of identity. When mystics speak as though they have a consciousness of being identical with God, this is beyond the Christian tradition' (ibid. 141-3)

The Experience of God in the Early Methodist Tradition

The Methodist understanding and experiences of God were, for the most part, religious, extrovertive, transformational and tending towards a deeper union with God. While one must acknowledge the inadequacy of any attempt of a finite human being to describe or understand an encounter with an infinite, transcendent being -- God -- one can argue the probability of God's existence and the rational possibility of divine revelation in which the acts of God are apprehended because of the divine illumination of the human mind itself (Wiebe 2004: 195-220).

The Wesley Family and the Eighteenth Century Context

The Methodist movement that emerged in the lives and the ministries of John and Charles Wesley must be understood within the larger context of the Christian heritage of England (Heitzenrater 1995:1-95), the widespread sources of the Evangelical Revival independent of any contact with the Wesleys (Walsh 1966; Ward 1992), and the family home in Epworth (Davies and Rupp 1965, 1-79, 115-44). The theological and spiritual environment of the Wesley home was both High Church and Puritan. It was a spiritual theology based on the 'love of God' rather than the 'faith in Christ' of Continental Protestantism. There was a genuine concern for 'inward religion' as represented by Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, *The Spiritual Combat* of the Italian Scupoli, the *Pensées* of Blaise Paschal, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas Kempis, and *The Life of Monsieur de Renty.*

Oxford Methodism, 1725 - 1735

When John Wesley (1703-91) made the decision to enter Holy Orders in 1725 and 'make religion the business of his life'. In Thomas Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* he found insight and the inward experience of 'much sensible comfort … such as I was an utter stranger to before'. By it John was convinced 'that true religion was seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as our words and actions *(Works.*25:224). Jeremy Taylor's *Rules for Holy Living and Dying* reinforced this message and led him to keep a daily record of his spiritual experiences. William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life,* and *Christian Perfection,* strengthened John's commitment to 'purity of intention' (to do the will of God) and 'simplicity of affection' (love for God and neighbor).

Reason and Revelation

John's letter of November 22, 1725, documented the outcome of an extended discussion of the nature of Christian faith with his parents, moving the 22 year old Wesley away from the prevailing rationalism of Oxford and reestablishing the primacy of divine revelation. 'I am, therefore, at length come over entirely to your opinion, that saving faith (including practice) is an assent to what God has revealed because He has revealed it and not because the truth of it may be evinced by reason' *(Works.*25:186-8). This adjustment in the normative authority of revelation over reason separated John Wesley from the dominant philosophy of the Enlightenment and grounded Methodism in Holy Scripture as the primary locus of divine

authority and revelation (Jones 1995: 17-61). 'The law and the testimony' (Isa. 8:20) became a favorite phrase of John Wesley to represent the Old and New Testaments as the absolute standard by which any experience of God was to be evaluated. At the same time, the Wesleys continued to value reason and conscience because these faculties of the human soul were gifts from God.

Human reason, according to John and Charles Wesley, functioned in three ways: 1) sense perception -- simply taking in information, 2) judgment -- evaluating the information received, and 3) discourse -- comparing this information to other information and experiences *(Works.*2:590; see Matthews 1986: 125-156). The human conscience was 'that faculty of the soul which, by the assistance of the grace of God, sees at one and the same time, (1) our own tempers and lives, the real nature and quality of our thoughts, words and action; (2) the rule whereby we are to be directed, and (3) the agreement or disagreement therewith' *(Works.*3:485).

Understanding and Experience

The human capacity to understand and experience God is explained in John Wesley's first University Sermon, preached at St. Mary's in Oxford (Nov. 15, 1730). Simply put, the Creator endowed Adam and Eve with all the qualities needed for an authentic relationship *(Works.*4:300-3). They were created spiritual beings in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*). Even though their free choice resulted in the fall into sin, the defacement of the divine image, and the brokenness of divine-human relationship--it was not totally destroyed because of God's free choice to continue by grace what was no longer possible by nature.

During the period from 1725-1735, John Wesley read more titles by John Norris than any other author listed among the 684 different works identified in his private Oxford diaries (Heitzenrater, 1972, pp. 493-525). Norris wove together the strands of moralism, mysticism, and rationalism in a theology of holiness and happiness that the Wesleys found philosophically and existentially attractive. Along with Thomas á Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, Robert Nelson and William Law--John Norris reflected and reinforced many of the core values of the Wesley family. In contrast to William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life,* which appealed directly to the human will and reason, convicting the reader of the need to change; Norris appealed to the heart and provided spiritual motivation for his reader to live a holy life. Norris affirmed:

> the Design of the Christian Dispensation is to perfect Holiness, to advance the interest of the Divine Life, to elevate us in the utmost Degree of Moral Perfection our Nature is here capable of, and, as far as possible, to make us Partakers of the Divine (Norris 1707, 1:10).

Therefore, a prudent Christian would pray for temporal things conditionally, and for spiritual things 'such as pardon of sin, and grace to leave it' knowing 'that God *would have all men to be saved*, to attain the happiness for which he made them' (John Wesley's extract from Norris Christian Prudence cited here from *Works.*Pine 8:165f).

It is reasonable to claim that Charles Wesley and the other 43 members of the Oxford Methodist movement shared this understanding of humankind because Norris's works were required reading for the Oxford Methodists and later published for the use of Holy Club members (Heitzenrater, 1972, 332-381). These early Methodists were confident that it was possible to experience God because God was capable of communicating with his creation in 'several Ways, and in several Manners, and by several Instruments'. Norris provided the theological, philosophical, and spiritual foundation for 18th century Methodist openness to a variety of religious experiences. God speaks *within* (through reason, the light of inward truth, and the secret whispers of his Spirit) and *without* (through all of creation)--and most directly -- through the Holy Scriptures (Norris 1707, 3:237-44). God can speak through all and be experienced in all; however, the normal means for a Christian to experience God is through the means of grace.

The Means of Grace

During the Oxford years, there is a clear sense that it is the duty of humankind to cooperate with the grace of God and participate in all the 'means of grace': worship, prayer, searching the scriptures, fasting, Christian conversation, and regular participation in the sacrament. Prayer is the first means of grace identified by the Wesleys and their first publication was a book of *Prayers for Every Day of the Week*. Prayer helps focuses one's thoughts on God, stirs up awareness of the human need for God, quickens the desire for the prayer to be answered, and maintains the religious passion. The spiritual life would soon be extinct without the breathings of prayer to inspire and give it motion.

The prudent Christian gives attention to the reading or hearing of scripture because it enlightens the understanding and composes the mind into a religious temper. The aim in reading is not curiosity or speculation, but with a clear design to learn and do the will of God. In a similar manner, one is to attend carefully, humbly, expectantly to the Word preached--waiting for the grace of God in obedience to the ordinances of God.

The Methodist understanding of 'works of mercy' and 'works of piety' were essential to develop the 'dispositions of soul which constitute real Christianity' *(Works.*1:572-591). Works of charity or mercy include everything that would be of benefit to the body or soul of the neighbor, be it words of spiritual advice, instruction, or reproof; or, the actions of giving alms, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick or imprisoned. These actions are means of grace; and, when done with purity of intention, allowed one to experience God. Works of piety included prayer, worship, searching the scriptures, fasting, Christian conference, and the Lord's supper; and, rightly understood, were means 'to commune with God' *(Works.*1:575).

Union with God

The aim of the Christian life was union with God. This understanding 'that the Perfection of the Soul is her Union with God' was common to John Norris and other writes that appeared in the required reading list for the Oxford Methodists and in *The Christian Library* published for

the lay leaders and traveling preachers (50 volumes published 1749-55). The connection between affection, attention and union were absolute: 'Whatever we love, we unite our selves to, and the more we love, the more we are so United' (Norris 1707, 3:166-199). John Wesley's sermon before the University in 1733 made it clear that participation in the divine life is the essence of Christian existence: 'One thing shall ye desire for its own sake—the fruition of him that is all in all. One happiness shall ye propose to your souls, even an union with him that made them, the having "fellowship with the Father and the Son". . . . One design ye are to pursue to the end of time—the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity' *(Works.*1:408; see also Newport, 2001: 96ff).

This suggestion that union with God might include fellowship with the individual members of the Trinity was a reality for some of the early Methodist people in the later part of the century. In a letter of spiritual guidance to Lady Maxwell (1742-1810), John Wesley disclosed: 'Mr. Charles Perronet was the first person I was acquainted with who was favored with the same experience as the Marquis de Renty, with regard to the ever-blessed Trinity; Miss Ritchie was the second; Miss Roe (now Mrs. Rogers) the third. I have as yet found but a few instances; so that this is not, as I was at first apt to suppose, the common privilege of all that are "perfect in love"' (*Works*.Jackson 12:403). De Renty's experience demonstrated that a Christian might 'carry about with you an experimental verity, and a fullness of the presence of the ever-blessed Trinity' which empowered a love for neighbor that found expression in concrete actions envisioned in Matthew 25:32-44.

The Struggle with Mysticism

Through William Law, the Wesley brothers were introduced to the *Theologica Germanica* and the *Sermons* of Eckhart Tauler *(Works.*18:243f). Over the years, John Wesley abridged and published their works and the accounts of nine Roman Catholic Mystics: Macarius, de Renty, Fénelon, Brother Lawrence, Paschal, Madame Borignon, Juan D'Avila, Molinos, Lopez, and Madame Guyon. Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., argued that Wesley continued to admire the ascetic or extravertive mystics because of their attention to the inner journey toward union with God in love; and, the outward journey of obedience to the ethical and moral instruction to love one's neighbor, feed the hungry and proclaim good news to the poor (Tuttle, 1989). It was the quietistic or more introvertive mystics that John Wesley found to be speculative, antinomian and near-pantheistic--those who denied the means of grace almost destroyed Wesley's own faith in period 1735 to 1738 (Davies and Rupp, 1965:45).

The Mission to North America, 1735-1738

The journey to North America brought the Wesleys brothers into contact with a variety of different people, cultures and theologies; none more important than the Moravian Brethren who were spiritual descendents of John Huss and the Bohemian Brethren (Podmore, 1998). The contrast of the religious experience of the Wesley brothers in relation to their Moravian friends was striking. The progressive process of salvation envisioned by the Wesleys at this time did not

produce the same feeling of assurance offered by the Moravian experience of instant, perceptible salvation by grace through faith alone. Contact with the Moravian Brethren in Georgia also afforded the Wesleys important insights into new forms of spiritual practice (including the singing of hymns) and structures for the spiritual formation (organizing men, women and children into small groups).

The Power of Music

Onboard the ship to Georgia, the Wesleys brothers were deeply impressed with Moravian practice of singing hymns. They observed firsthand the power of music to open the way to a different dimension of spiritual experience. Before Charles return to England he took the first Methodist Collection of Psalms and Hymns to be published in Charlestown by Lewis Timothy; the first of many books of hymns and spiritual songs the Wesleys would publish for their followers. The spiritual power of these hymns and sacred poems helped reinforce the content of Methodist sermons and tracts.

The Influence of Moravian Theology and the Experience

After John and Charles Wesley returned to England in the spring of 1738 they met Peter Böhler, who persuaded them that 'true faith in Christ . . . had those two fruits inseparably attending it, "dominion over sin, and constant peace from a sense of forgiveness'" *(Works.*18:247f). This theological conversion was followed by an inward evangelical experience of the new birth; first Charles on Pentecost Sunday, May 21; then, John on Wednesday, May 24. Charles described his inner transformation as 'a strange palpitation of heart' (Kimbrough and Newport, 2008:106); John's description was more detailed: 'I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ and Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death' *(Works.*18:250; Maddox 1990).

The Emergence of Wesleyan Methodism

Following their experiences of the new birth, John and Charles entered the most formative decade of their lives. The period from 1738-1748 was marked by intense theological conflict with Moravian Quietism, Calvinistic Predestination, Anglican Antinomianism, and the excessive behavior of some Huguenot prophets and prophetesses. Different segments of the Church of England accused the Wesleys of teaching works righteousness, rank enthusiasm, and popery. Rapid expansion was hindered by separation from the Moravians, the Calvinistic Methodists and some Church of England evangelicals.

The Wesleys understanding and experiencing God was refined in the crucible of the evangelical experience. Within days after their respective conversions, the Wesley brothers were faced with unexpected spiritual struggles; Charles dreamed of fighting two devils on May 22, 1738 (Kimbrough and Newport 2008: 108) and John's experience of the new birth did not match his expectation of absolute assurance of salvation and uninterrupted joy. John empirical

orientation forced him to modify his teaching and allow for greater variety than his Moravian mentors. John and Charles Wesleys' commitment to the centrality of faith in Christ and the authority of scripture did not change from this point onward; however, the Methodist understanding and interpretation of experience continued to be refined *(Works.*18: 250).

The Moravian expectation was that the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of saving faith was to be received in a moment--and that moment was **now**. By the early months of 1739 ordinary people, young and old, male and female, lay and clergy, experienced the power of God to awaken, convince, convert and sanctify. Preaching, prayer, Christian conversation, Holy Scripture and participation in the Lord's Table were transformed from 'confirming ordinances' to assist the Christian on the gradual journey of spiritual growth into 'converting ordinances' and occasions for an immediate, life changing encounter with God *(Works.*19:158f).

From 1738-1748 the Wesley brothers struggled to reconcile the Moravian theology of saving faith with their own understanding and experience of God; to say nothing of the variety of experiences of their followers. John's letter to his brother Charles in 1748 marks the conclusion of the struggle to distinguish between the felling of assurance and the reality of justifying faith. 'Is justifying faith a sense of pardon? *Negatur*--it is denied' *(Works.*26:254).

After 1748 the Wesleys modified their distinction between the faith of a 'servant' and that of a 'son' or child of God and affirmed that both of these degrees of faith were sufficient for salvation. The faith of a servant was understood to be 'such a divine conviction of God and of the things of God as even in its infant state enables every one that possesses it to "fear God and work righteousness"'. The servant who continues to seek faith will one day 'receive the faith of the children of God by his *revealing* his only-begotten Son in their hearts' so that they may enjoy the spiritual assurance and privileges of those who have been adopted as children of God. In the 1788 sermon "On Faith" John confirmed this move away from their earlier position. Faith is 'a divine evidence and conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1) that included 'every species of faith, from the lowest to the highest'. He lamented the fact that Methodist preachers in the early years 'were not sufficiently apprised of the difference between a servant and a child of God' condemning any who did not have an absolute assurance of salvation *(Works.*3:491-501).

Structures and Spiritual Guidance

Central to the experience of God in Wesleyan Methodism was the small group structures that emerged to support people on the journey to spiritual maturity and scriptural holiness. John and Charles knew the spiritual benefits of Oxford Methodism and the Moravians expanded their understanding to include different groups for people at different stages of their spiritual maturity and readiness to engage in spiritual practices. The Wesley brothers developed three distinct types of small groups called 'band meetings' and 'class meetings'.

The Methodist Band meetings were for those who had experienced justifying grace--like the Moravian choirs, these groups were separated on the basis of gender and marital status. Unlike the Moravian structures, the Methodist bands had only four to eight members with one person

designated as the leader with the additional responsibility to attend the leaders meeting. (Albin 2001: 45-48)

The Methodist Select Band or Select Society was a unique structure that emerged in 1741 to help those who had experienced the sanctifying grace of God and to help support those who sincerely desired it. It was also a place for the spiritual care of the movement's leaders, including the Wesleys (*Works* 9:270). Unlike the male and female bands for new believers, the select band included everyone actively engaged in this stage of the spiritual journey; men and women, married and single--all met together.

The Methodist class meeting emerged as a uniquely Methodist phenomenon. In February of 1742, Captain Foye recommended that the Bristol Society was subdivided into local neighborhood units or "classes" of about twelve families in each in order to facilitate a weekly collection of penny a week per family to pay the builders of the New Room. The unintended consequence was that the physical and spiritual state of each family was immediately known. If the family was in financial need, the class leader sought help from the Society stewards; and, if the family was living in chaos or sin, the leader became an instrument of 'correction, reproof and instruction in righteousness' (Watson 1985).

Membership in the class meeting included people of all ages and without regard to gender or marital status. The required religious experience was a sincere desire for God (convincing grace) and the willingness to actively engage in the spiritual journey. Within the class participants learned the basic principles of Christian faith, behavior, and affections or tempers necessary for Christian transformation. Research into the remaining records indicated that nearly half of the early Methodist people came to saving faith *after* they were admitted to the class meeting (Albin 1985: 275-280).

The key to the health and growth of the class meeting was directly related to the quality and character of the local class leaders. Selected personally by John or Charles Wesley, a leader was responsible for determining the time and place for the weekly meeting, choosing the hymns that were sung, leading the meeting, providing spiritual and scriptural advice for the members, and offering prayers appropriate to each member's expressed need.

The United Society was the structure that emerged in 1743 to provide spiritual guidance and oversight to the Methodist members; and, to support the development of local spiritual leaders. Each person desiring admission had a sponsor; someone who was already a member and willing to attest to the readiness of the prospective member to keep the General Rules. These rules were read to the perspective member and explained so that he or she could understand the Methodist way of life embodied in the three rules: 1) do no harm, 2) do good to the bodies and souls of others, and 3) participate in all the means of grace that were identified as 'the ordinances of God' *(Works.*9:68-80). Those who agreed were placed in a trial band for eight to twelve weeks to determine the level of their sincerity and commitment to living the Methodist doctrine, discipline, and way of life. Those who successfully completed the trial period were then admitted as members of the Methodist Society and assigned to a class or band meeting based on

their personal experience of grace. As they progressed in their spiritual journey, the small groups provided the context for regular instruction, shared experiences, mutual support, and accountability for their life in grace: prevenient grace (field preaching and the trial band), convincing grace (the class meeting), justifying grace (the band meeting) and sanctifying grace (the select band) (Albin 2001: 33-52, 52-66)

Spiritual Guidance for Local Leaders through the Traveling Preachers

The United Society provided a system that allowed the local leaders of the classes, bands, stewards and trustees to meet with the Wesleys and their appointed assistants. The 'Leaders Meeting' and later the 'Quarterly Meeting' provided occasions for spiritual guidance, instruction, prayer and leadership development. The itinerant system of traveling preachers and assistants made it possible for local leaders to receive teaching and spiritual guidance from a variety of different personalities and perspectives. This, in turn, enhanced the spiritual growth and maturity of local leaders, both male and female. The increasing numbers of lay leaders provided the necessary human resources for the continued growth and spread of the Methodist movement.

Testing and Interpreting the Experience of God

In her 1727 letter of spiritual advice to her son, Susanna wrote: 'The tree is known by its fruit, but not always by its blossoms; what blooms beautifully sometimes bears bitter fruit' *(Works.*25:210). The phrase appeared repeatedly in John Wesley letters and journal; for example, February 20, 1758, at Maldon in Essex, John noted with approval the large congregation at five in the morning and observed, 'Fair blossoms! But which of these will bring forth fruit?' *(Works.*21:136, 265).

For the Wesleys, the first test of a purported experience of God was the fruit of a transformed life. 'I have seen (as far as a thing of this kind can be seen) very many persons changed in a moment from the spirit of fear, horror, despair, to the spirit of love, joy, and peace; and from sinful desires till then reigning over them to a pure desire of doing the will of God. . . . These transformed lives 'are my living arguments for what I assert, viz. that God *does now, as aforetime, give remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost, even to us and to our children*' *(Works.*19:59-60).

As the dramatic physical responses to the presence and power of God increased in 1739, the Wesleys were clear that all experiences were to be evaluated in light of the scripture. Christians 'were not to judge of the Spirit whereby anyone spoke, either by appearances, or by common report, or by their own inward feelings. No, nor by any dreams, visions, or revelations supposed to be made to their souls, any more than by their tears, or any involuntary effects wrought upon their bodies'. John Wesley warned them 'all these were in themselves of a doubtful, disputable nature: they might be from God and they might not, and were therefore not simply to be relied on (any more than simply to be condemned) but to be tried by a farther rule, to be brought to the only certain test, 'the law and the testimony' *(Works.*19:73, June 22, 1739).

In addition to the test of scripture and fruit, John and Charles Wesley applied the test of time to any supposed religious experience. John would visit those who had experienced strong physical manifestations of the supposed work of the Holy Spirit repeatedly, beginning the day after the event took place and then each time he was in that same location to see if the work begun was bearing the fruit of the Spirit in righteousness and true holiness of heart and life *(Works.*19:32, note on Mrs. Randal).

Spiritual Senses and Perceptible Inspiration

Because human being were given, by grace, spiritual senses, it was possible for them to experience the 'inward witness' Samuel Wesley identified as the strongest proof of Christianity in 1735. The Methodist appeal to the 'spiritual senses' drew upon a tradition within the Christian church that can be traced back to Origen, Pseudo-Marcarius, and Bonaventure. This tradition extended through Puritan authors like Richard Baxter, William Perkins, John Owen and Richard Sibbes. All of these writers employed the analogy of sense perception in describing the work of grace. Rex Matthews is correct in pointing to Henry Scougal's devotional classic, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, as the most likely source for the Wesley brothers joining the Hebrews passage with the concept of spiritual sensation made possible only in those who believe (Matthews 1986: 232-46; see *Works*.11:46). John Wesley wrote to John Bennet stating succinctly, 'Faith is seeing God; love is feeling God' *(Works.*26:108).

The 'Witness of the Spirit' was the subject of two sermons by John Wesley written and published in 1746 and 1767. The *objective witness of the Spirit* was a result of the work of God perceived by the soul in a manner similar to the way human knowledge was the result of sense experience perceived by the mind. The *subjective witness of one's own spirit* and conscience came in response the initiative of the Holy Spirit. On the one hand, '"we love God, because he first loved us," and for his sake we "love our brothers also"'; and, on the other 'It is hard to find words in the language of men to explain "the deep things of God". Indeed there are none that will adequately express what the children of God experience' *(Works.*1:274-5).

Diversity of Religious Experience Affirmed

By 1765, it is clear that John Wesley had come to accept the limits of religious language in relation to Christian experience. He argued that 'true believers do not all speak alike' and 'it is not to be expected that they should' for there are 'a thousand circumstances that may cause them to vary from each other' including education, religious tradition, natural abilities, and time. Wesley was willing to allow that 'Men may differ from us in their opinions as well as their expressions. 'Tis possible they may not have a *distinct apprehension* of the very blessing which they enjoy. Their *ideas* may not be so *clear*, and yet their experience may be a sound as ours.' *(Works.*1:454f) At the close of his life John affirmed 'whatever change is wrought in men, whether in their hearts or lives' must be of God even if these persons have no clear understanding of 'those capital doctrines, the fall of man, justification by faith, and of the atonement made by the death of Christ, and of his righteousness transferred to them. . . . I believe the merciful God

regards the lives and tempers of men more than their ideas. . . . "Without holiness," I own, "no man shall see the Lord;" but I dare not add, "or clear ideas". *(Works.*4:168-176, here 175)

Methodism in the 19th Century

With the death of Charles Wesley in 1788 and John in 1791, the Methodist movement was left without a leadership structure sufficient to maintain the diverse theology, structure, and practice that had emerged. The spiritual desires for union with God and practical implications for the love for neighbor were too complex for the 'Legal Hundred' and the Annual Conference to manage without the classical and theological education of the Wesley brothers. The substance of the Select Band was quickly supplanted by the emotion of Prayer Meeting; and, the North American Camp Meeting soon overshadowed the field preaching of ordinary local pastors. The movement began to fragment over the issues related to church government (e.g. Methodist New Connexion) and regional revivals (e.g. Primitive Methodism in Staffordshire, 1811, and the Bible Christian Movement in south-west England, 1815).

Methodism in Great Britain and the United States achieved recognition as a distinct Christian denomination; however, they failed to keep their power as a movement composed of diverse types of small groups to assist people at various stages of the spiritual journey. The complex structures of the Wesleyan movement designed to nurture leaders capable of sustaining the expansion of the movement gave way to the organizational structures needed to care for the institution..

The last fifty years of the nineteenth century was the era of great preachers, and Methodist spirituality was undoubtedly influenced by the 'cult of the pulpit' (Wakefield 1999: 51). The Holiness Movement focused on the Methodist teaching about the need for sanctification and a second work of God that would eradicate inbred sin. The center for this movement in Great Britain was Cliff College in the Derbyshire Peak District and Samuel Chadwick (1860-1932) became one of the key leaders.

Methodism in the 20th Century

At the turn of the century William James (1842-1910) pivotal works, *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) provided a foundation for intellectual conversation about religious experience of the Wesleyan Christians and gave rise to the wider conversation about religious experience in other world religions (Proudfoot 2004). Sydney Diamond extended the conversation with the Wesleyan tradition with his work on *The Psychology of the Methodist Revival: An Empirical and Descriptive Study* (1934). However, Diamond made no attempt to relate his work to the needs of the contemporary mission of the Methodist churches and it was, for the most part, neglected.

Samuel Chadwick helped to found Southport Convention to bring spiritual renewal and scriptural holiness. To some extent, Southport stood for the doctrine of the eradication of inbred sin and imparted holiness, as against the Keswick teaching of repression of sin and imputed righteousness.

In North America the fundamental faith of the holiness tradition encountered the Pentecostal movement that began in the Bible College founded in 1900 by Charles Parham. The Pentecostal Holiness movement resulted and some Christians attempted to bring together these two revival movements.

The British reaction to revivalism and the various strands of the holiness tradition can be seen in the works of Newton Flew, W.R. Maltby, J. Alexander Findlay and Leslie Weatherhead. These more liberal clergy drew their spirituality from the synoptic gospels and the cross. According to Findlay, 'The only Pentecost which can really turn the world upside down is the Pentecost that shall follow a new vision of Calvary' (Wakefield 1999: 65).

The liberal reaction to revivalism in North America can be seen in the discipline of pastoral counseling. In his book, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*, Thomas Oden demonstrated the dramatic reduction in the number of references to 'key classical sources which have carried enormous weight for centuries of Christian pastoral counseling' (Oden 1984: 26). Using the work of ten significant writers on themes related to spiritual guidance and the experience of God (Cyprian, Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine, Gregory, Luther, Calvin, Herbert, Baxtor and Taylor), Oden examines the work of seven mainline authors writing on pastoral care in the nineteenth century and seven authors in the twentieth century writing on the same topic. The nineteenth century writers make reference to the ten classic authors above 314 times. The twentieth century volumes do not have a single reference to any one of the ten. Instead, the twentieth century works contain 330 references to the following modern psychotherapists: Freud, Jung, Rogers, Fromm, Sullivan and Berne.

During the 1960s many Methodists lost confidence orthodox Christianity and traditional methods of spirituality resulting in more radical expressions of theology and experience. Those inclined toward mysticism moved in the direction of Eastern religions or the New Age movement. Those inclined toward activism moved toward the 'Jesus People' movement or into intentional Christian communities for mission and evangelism. Those inclined to philosophy found the work of Albert North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Process Theology of value; e.g., Charles Hartshorne, Schubert M. Ogden, John B. Cobb, Jr. and W. Norman Pittenger. Those inclined to ecumenism moved toward the work of the Consultation on Common Texts to develop common versions of key liturgical texts (Gloria, Creed, Lord's Prayer, etc.); however, this work was soon taken up by an international body which became known as the International Consultation on English Texts (ICET). Those who preferred forms of worship that were more historic and high church moved in the direction of the liturgical renewal.

In the final decades of the 20th century, postmodern philosophy and theology in the northern and western hemispheres made room for renewed conversation about the Christian experience of God; for example, Morton Kelsey's work, *Encounter with God*: *A Theology of Christian Experience*, and Kenneth Leech, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality*. There was also a growing interest in world religions and the possibility of a more universal experience of God.

Methodism in the 21st Century

Reflecting on the Methodist movement of the past two centuries, John Kent has speculated that in every generation there are some who need the experience of 'primary religion . . . with its basic belief in intrusive supernatural power'. He argued that this form of religion 'survives at all times and ... at all social levels'. The success of Wesleyan Methodism of the 18th century was precisely because it met this basic human need (Kent 2002: 7f). Perhaps this insight is helpful as many Methodists and mainline Christians struggle to understand the rise of global Pentecostalism in the 21st century.

The weakness of many Methodist and Wesleyan movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had to do with their focus on the past glories of revival and renewal. The impact of the early Methodists were often idealized and exaggerated, creating an inappropriate standard to evaluate the work of God's Spirit in the present day and obscuring the need for innovation and change in order to faithfully live into the future.

Where Christian theologians and religious leaders have accepted the modernist antipathy toward the supernatural and mystical, the spiritual needs of the people go unmet. Where the supernatural and mystical experiences are not guided and nurtured by scripture, tradition, and reason--fanaticism and superstition may cause confusion and discredit those experience of God that are authentic.

Perhaps those in the Methodist traditions needed today is the willingness to hold theological formulations carefully, with humility and grace, acknowledging that no tradition has the ability to comprehend fullness of God's counsel; to reclaim the appropriate structures and practices to assist people on their spiritual journey of grace; and, engage in the mission to spread scriptural holiness across the land with the confidence that Christianity has never taken philosophy, natural science or any metaphysical scheme as its starting point. The human experience of God began with the activity of God in creation, it became clear in the incarnation and self-revelation of Jesus, and it continues though the intimate, transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

The Methodist understanding and experience of God is grounded in the Judeo-Christian scripture and developed in the context of the 18th century Enlightenment. Through the leadership of John and Charles Wesley, Methodism was able to bring together a dynamic understanding of reason and revelation based on the biblical teaching that humankind was created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, human beings were capable of an authentic relationship with their creator. The direct experience of God described in the early chapters of Genesis was disrupted by human disobedience and sin; however, it was not destroyed because of God chose to continue by grace with was no longer possible by nature. The provision of the law, the prophets and the Messiah were all understood to be a part of God's plan of redemption. In Christ, God took on human flesh and lived in relationship with those who were willing to follow him. In the Holy Spirit, the first disciples became living examples of the new life made possible in Christ.

All experience of God, for the Wesleys, was a gift of grace, to be received by faith. The only adequate response was faith, love and obedience. The wide diversity of Christian experiences within the Methodist movement were nurtured to maturity through a complex system of spiritual guidance involving: 1) a spiritual mentor or sponsor, 2) a small group leader of the class or band, 3) a variety of larger settings for spiritual instruction and practice; e.g. the meeting of the United Society, the Watch Night, the Love Feast and the Covenant Renewal Service; 4) literature for the spiritual instruction of those who could read; and 5) leadership training and opportunities for service that included both lay men and lay women. In addition to the local leaders, traveling preachers in connection with the Wesleys were available to assist in the more difficult matters of spiritual guidance, theology or practice.

Susanna Wesley's insight served her sons well and remains relevant: 'Fair blossoms, but which will bring forth fruit?'

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