

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

I'm convinced that a significant challenge is before us in evangelism, and that clarifying where contemporary Methodism comes out in regards to its own heritage will make a vast difference in how we approach evangelism today and in the future. Central to this whole issue is our comfort or fear, our expectancy or hesitancy, our assertiveness or passivity regarding the centrality of Christian experience in our Methodist heritage. Is Methodism "a religion of the heart" or is it not? Does Scripture, Christian tradition, reason and experience confirm that experience is central to a working faith? Or, have we tended to retreat from Wesley's own quadrilateral back to a Catholic-Reformation Anglican tri-lateral of Scripture, tradition, and reason? Bluntly put, does our heritage rest solidly on the centrality of the Christian experience? And if so, how?

My thesis is that it does so rest and my hope is to be able to both demonstrate how it so rests and what implications this has for evangelism in the Methodist tradition. None of this will be exhaustive, I will raise as many questions as I hope to answer. I trust that many of you will contribute your own suggestions, challenges and ideas to this mix. This is indeed a working paper.

Also, I am sure I do not need to remind you that my own primary focus will be the American scene, and mostly United Methodist. Nevertheless, I trust much of what I offer will be applicable elsewhere as well.

My outline is as follows:

1. The biblical witness to the place and meaning of Christian experience.
2. The Catholic, Reformation, and Anabaptist/Pietistic witness.
3. Wesley's own views and experience.
4. The place of experience in early Methodism.
5. Historical transitions regarding the place of Christian experience in Methodism.
6. The contemporary American social/spiritual/ecclesiastical context.
7. Proposals for recapturing the centrality of Christian experience in contemporary evangelism and Christian witness.

I.

THE BIBLICAL WITNESS TO THE PLACE AND MEANING OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Needless to say, Wesley himself gave the first and heaviest weight of authority to Scripture.

But what is the rule whereby men are to judge of right and wrong? . . . The Christian rule of right and wrong is the word of God, the writings of the Old and New Testament; . . . This is the lantern unto a Christian's feet, and a light in all his paths. This alone he receives as his rule of right or wrong. (From Wesley's sermon on "The Witness Of Our Own Spirit," Works V, p. 136)

Thus if our primary concern is to be faithful to our Methodist as well as our Christian heritage, it is fitting for us to give due weight to Scripture. And what is the witness of Scripture to the place of experience—that is the experience of God, true religious experience or spiritual experience—in the believer's life?

THE CENTRALITY OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE IN THE METHODIST HERITAGE

Ronald K. Crandall

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Of course, it is far beyond the bounds of this paper to explore a matter such as this exhaustively (though it would be a marvelous "experience"). I will rather seek to be suggestive of themes and patterns in Scripture. Let us therefore examine only the ramifications throughout Scripture of a single foundational text such as Jeremiah 31:31-34. Even if it be granted that the Old Testament norm is God's revelation as law rather than God's revelation as presence (An assumption hard to defend unless we look only to the masses and not to the key interpreters of faith. See G. Ernest Wright's Study in Biblical Theology, God Who Acts, SCM Press, Ltd, London 1952), this text from Jeremiah announces that the new covenant will be different.

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:33-34, RSV)

Three key ingredients of the announced new covenant stand out:

1. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts;"
2. "For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest;"
3. "For I will forgive their iniquity."

And how will these new covenant dimensions come to pass? They will be brought by the Messiah who indeed will perfectly be "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, . . . (and) the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:1, 2, 9).

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and the maidservants in those days, I will pour out my Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).

The new covenant is brought by a Messiah full of God's Spirit. Joel proclaims that this new age will be accompanied also by an outpouring of this same Spirit upon all. What is new about the new covenant? God's own "Anointed" shall come as one fully alive (enthused) in God's Spirit and will enable all of God's children to be likewise alive in his Spirit through: (1) total cleansing and forgiveness of all sin; (2) an immediate and intimate knowledge of God; (3) total transformation into the actual righteousness of God by the law being written on their hearts.

Another way of saying this is that the new covenant is: (1) In "my blood . . . for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28), and (2) In "my Spirit." Note that Peter's announcement regarding the experience of the early disciples at Pentecost is to be normative for all who repent, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, and receive baptism.

"Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promises to you and to your children and to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'" (Acts 2:36-39)

Peter without any prompting is led in his own mind immediately to Joel's prophesy about the outpouring of the Spirit. This is the nature of the new age. The Spirit is at the heart of the new covenant experience bringing freedom from sin and condemnation through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and witnessing to all who come to faith that they are indeed the children of God (Romans 8:1-16).

Also, note that Paul's description of the new covenant in II Corinthians is indeed a matter of this Holy Spirit who writes the law of God upon the tablets of human hearts and gives us confidence and competence as ministers of a new covenant "Not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (3:6).

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (II Corinthians 3:17-18).

Michael Green, one of the most exemplary "Methodist/Anglican" evangelists of our day and pastor of St. Aldates Church here in Oxford writes:

"The early Christians seemed to have recognised from the outset that their experience of the Spirit was a continuation of their experience of Jesus. The Spirit is the means by which their Master kept them company. No longer was he the fitful, subpersonal manifestation of the naked might of God (as so often in the Old Testament days), but God's mighty presence brought to us in Jesus. The Spirit, they maintained, has come and changed our lives; he can do as much for any of you." 1.

The New Testament witness is to an experience of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a saving experience, a liberating experience, a transforming experience, an empowering experience. These New Testament Christians talked of "tasting" the kindness of the Lord and the powers of the age to come (I Peter 2:3, Hebrews 6:4-5). They had fellowship with the living God and based on their own experience of liberation were convinced that the whole created order was waiting to be set free from its own bondage and obtain the same glorious liberty which they had come to know as the children of God (Romans 8:19-21). And not only was their faith changed from thoughts about God to radical confidence in his ever present power, but they were also certain that this was possible with any other person who gladly received the gift which Peter announced at Pentecost. And this too was their experience.

To a great degree the experience of the Holy Spirit of God is the New Covenant. He convicts us of sin, guides us to all truth, bears witness to Christ, helps us understand the foolishness of the cross, imparts to us the mind of Christ, leads us to fellowship with the Father and the Son, transforms us into the fullness

of Christ's own image, equips us with every good gift—especially with the love that is of God and toward God and for all the world. And it is by this love that we live as the righteous children of God keeping his commandments. This is not just theology—it is experience!

## II.

### THE CATHOLIC, REFORMATION, AND ANABAPTIST/PIETISTIC WITNESS

In the broadest of brush strokes we move now from the earliest days of Christian experience and reflection through the 17 centuries preceding John Wesley. We will in no way be able to chase all of the interesting nuances and episodes of faith, reason, and experience through these centuries; but I hope we can follow the golden thread of spiritual experience as it weaves its way up and down across the fabric of these years—sometimes visible as a bold accent color, sometimes disappearing below the surface all together, but always reappearing once again in either subtle shades or bold new patterns.

And what is this "spiritual experience"? Although its forms vary greatly, at the heart of it is the belief that by God's own design the human psyche/soul/spirit/person is capable of direct and personal knowledge of the divine presence (and perhaps a whole unseen but real spiritual order). In every culture, religion, and age there have been those who held to this perception and announced it as their own experience. In some religions such as animism the vast majority of persons acknowledge an awareness of this spiritual realm eventhough the realm seems mostly oriented toward mischief and evil. In shamanistic religions such an encounter with the divine is restricted to the specially elect and the experience of this contact with the "other world" usually led the person to a vocation as a shaman. However, we may not conclude that such beliefs are merely to be relegated to superstition or to an unsophisticated cultural view of reality. There are similarities here both to the calling of our Old Testament prophets and to the experience of the earliest Christians. Everyone, even in these "ancient and backward" days did not automatically accept this view of reality. Remember that Moses prior to his own "burning bush" episode was only aware of his Hebrew faith as a heritage, not expecting it to mean anything directly and personally for himself in an encounter with God. Nor did he accept that such an experience would be commonly believed or easily communicated to his fellow Hebrews or the the Pharaoh himself.

"Then Moses answered, 'but behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" (Exodus 4:1).

Therefore, although history abounds with much evidence to the contrary, both in the world and in our own particular faith heritage (Old and New Testaments), it has never been easy to defend the reality of "spiritual experience" since it is by its very nature deeply personal and usually restricted to the few. The uniqueness of the New Testament record is that this experience of God's own personal love, and forgiveness, and power is meant for every person through the new covenant in Jesus' blood and Spirit. What has history done with this promise?

We cannot understand nor trace the history of at least the western branch of Christendom concerning this issue without noting first of all the influence of two significant Greek Philosophers, namely Plato and Aristotle. Plato more than any other single non-Christian mind influenced early Christian thinking. He had a unique understanding of the existence of two separate but related realms of

reality and a theory of knowledge connecting us to both. On the one hand, he believed human beings were in touch with physical reality through both reason and the sense experiences. But he believed this whole realm of reality to be a shifting and even often unpleasant one. Born into a difficult age he believed persons could find more permanence and peace in the unchanging realm of Ideas, spiritual realities, and the Divine. We are also in touch with this reality, though not through the usual senses and reason (which Aristotle later maintained), but through the more important and direct senses of the inner soul. For Plato there were four methods of "knowing" this spiritual realm: (1) prophecy—persons possessed by and speaking for the Divine, (2) healing—accomplished in both body and mind through a divine catharsis, (3) artistic inspiration—producing beauty by aligning eternal form with physical matter under divine inspiration, and (4) love—the greatest of heaven's blessings and the ultimate healing which brings a fractured soul to wholeness.

We are made in such a way that the psyche ("soul") has within it a divine element that is able to be in touch with the great expanses of the spiritual realm and is set in motion for this end most perfectly by the divine gift of love.<sup>1</sup> Morton Kelsey has compared Plato's perceptions of spiritual reality to those mentioned in the New Testament. He has tallied that 3,874 of the 7,957 verses in the New Testament say something about one or more of the five categories of "spiritual experience," namely: (1) healings and miracles, (2) dreams, visions and inward hearing, (3) intuitive discernment of the angelic or demonic, (4) direct knowledge akin to extra sensory perception, and (5) direct possession of a human agent for prophecy.<sup>2</sup>

It was in line with this kind of perception and theory of reality that much of the early, and even some of later Christian tradition has been formulated. In the West, Justin Martyr was converted to the Christian religion precisely because it appeared to be the final and perfect answer to his Platonistic philosophical quest. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Cyprian followed. In Alexandria Clement, Origen and Athanasius led the way as early Christian apologists. All of these men were basically Platonistic in their approach as were Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Chrysostom in the East.

On the other side of the Greek influence in Christendom is Aristotle, Plato's student and successor. As much as he owed to Plato, he was never satisfied with Plato's willingness to define the "other world" as primary and set it completely outside and above the world of "natural experience" and reason. Plato had a two-story universe. Aristotle removed the upper level almost all together and came back "down to earth." The unseen realm existed for Aristotle, but the only "solid" evidence we have of it is sensory experience and reason. These are good reflections of any ultimate reality thought Aristotle. Plato saw sensory experience and reason as only poor reflections of a greater reality beyond. God for Aristotle was a "First Cause." He believed neither in personal immortality nor in creation.

The history of Christian thinking in the West regarding the reality of and/or significance of spiritual experience as it relates to the Christian faith bounces back and forth even to this very day between the extremes of an essentially Platonistic perception or an Aristotelian perception of reality. Neither of these perceptions is totally adequate—neither is, of course, even historically Christian. But together they form important philosophical bookends for the rational explanation of the Christian faith.

From Augustine through the middle ages it appeared that first hand spiritual

experience was at least as valid if not more valid than sensory experience and reason. Reason was valued by both sides of the issue, but for those like Augustine who followed Plato it was primarily a consequence of and a handmaiden to spiritual experience and revelation. For the other side who followed Aristotle it became eventually clear that reason and natural experience had to be held in contrast and even opposition to direct, personal, spiritual experience. Granted, much of Augustine's influence on Roman Catholicism focused revelation more and more toward "authority." And authority was mainly Scripture and reasoned tradition. But seeking the spiritual reality was generally normative and accepted as the "best" choice whenever possible. For many of the masses, of course, it was not considered possible; and priests and monks grew to be seen as a privileged and "called" few. Christianity was moving away from an experience of God and his blessings for today and focusing these possibilities more and more toward eternal bliss in the world to come.

"The thinkers of medieval Christendom understood life as a *via*, a way, leading to a definite goal beyond itself in a blessed immortality. The way of life is laid out in the Scriptures, God's revelations to men; and the blessedness to be reached in heaven far exceeds anything human life itself has to offer." 3.

Also faith was shifting away from a first hand emotional and volitional approach to life involving deep personal commitment, trust, and self-giving, to a formalized intellectual acceptance of certain religious ideas based on the authority of Scripture and the interpretation of the church.

Enter Scholasticism, which took its approach to thinking directly from Aristotle. Primarily, Scholasticism is a method, a way of conducting research to determine reality. Still holding to the revealed truth of God deposited in the church through Scripture and tradition, the Scholastic theologians like Anselm established a new trend.

"(I)t is fitting and proper that reason should try to understand dogma, but in the event this cannot be done, reason must yield gladly to authority. Anselm proclaimed publicly and with confidence that all the accepted doctrines of the church could be understood by reason, and that it was the duty of the Christian to apply his reason to his understanding. Not to put faith first in our understanding, he said, is presumption, but not to use one's reason upon one's faith is negligence." 4.

The method of proof Anselm used, called "dialectics" (a thesis, antithesis and synthesis—using either deductive or inductive reasoning) was used later by Thomas Aquinas. Flowing directly out of Aristotle's two-fold source of knowledge, sense experience and reason, Thomas built one of the most impressive theological systems ever developed. His perception was that grace builds on nature. Reason and logic are the ingredients of a "Natural Theology" which provides the primary path to God. God has aided man with revelation, but the revelation of God is rational truth, not sensory experience. The existence of God can be proven by reason and then the life of faith can be lived because of revelation as the guidance of God for rational human beings.

For Aquinas a still higher form of knowledge than either reason or the natural senses did exist. He refers to this level as the "beatific vision"—direct knowledge of God obtained through the vision of God. But for Aquinas this, the greatest of all God's gifts, could only be realized after death.

"At this point the issue between Aristotle and Neo-Platonism was sharply drawn, the former insisting that all knowledge is rooted in the evidence

of the senses and the latter claiming there is a special way of religious knowledge. The former is naturalistic, the latter mystical. Thomas' problem as synthesizer was to show, on the supposition that all knowledge is derived from the senses, how the Christian can yet know God and come into direct communion with him. His solution was to draw a distinction between the conditions of knowledge in this world and the next. Reason and faith, he said, are the only modes of knowledge in this world, but in the next the mystic vision is possible. In this world the highest knowledge available to man, even through revelation, is knowledge about God; in the next world we shall be freed from our human limitations and by God's grace may look upon him directly in a knowledge of him as he is in himself." 5.

On this base almost all Roman Catholic doctrine is built after the 13th Century.

During the next several centuries the golden thread of Christian experience resurfaced mainly through the Catholic mystics. The Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian movements fostered many strong mystic leaders among them were Thomas a Kempis, Walter Hilton, Catherine of Genoa, and Ignatius Loyola, a Spanish contemporary of Martin Luther. For all of these persons, experience was deeply rooted in piety and a devotional quest. They were hungry for God. Their own conversions and subsequent mystical experiences of the immediacy of God often were the touch stones of great religious movements and expressions of Christian charity. They believed by and large in the constant improvement of one's own awareness of God and in the purity of one's action in the world as a result of such an awareness. These common themes are illustrated by Thomas a Kempis in The Imitation of Christ, by Walter Hilton in The Scale of Perfection, and later by William Law's Serious Call to A Devout And Holy Life.

Martin Luther's experience is widely known with no need to review it except to say it too moved from a "pondering" to revelation.

"Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that the 'just shall live by his faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. There upon, I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on new meaning. And whereas before 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love." 6.

But Luther's experience did not remain as the central focus of the Protestant movement. What moved once from pondering to revelation, moved again from revelation to doctrine.

"His personal 'experience of faith' and his early emphasis on the inward nature of faith (as opposed to the mere outward forms he so bitterly reacted against) gave several of his early 'spiritual' followers reason to believe they were in the same camp. However, the 'experience of faith' gradually began to move in the direction of an established 'doctrine of faith' as Luther moved down the road from rebel to reformer." 7.

Martin Luther, John Calvin and the other Protestant reformers who followed were usually deeply committed to the inner life and believed in a "religion of the heart" as Latourette observes.

"To Calvin, as to Luther, justification, or salvation, is by faith. Faith can come only as the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. It is more than

intellectual assent to truth. It is 'a knowledge of the divine benevolence toward us' and if it is to be valid that which the mind has grasped must 'be transfused into the heart.' . . . it is 'a true conversion of our life to God, proceeding from a sincere and serious fear of God, and consisting in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the spirit.' The fruits of repentance are love toward God and charity toward men, with sanctity and purity in our whole life." 8.

Reformation, theology, stressed prayer, but it was as obedience to the word of God in Scripture not as a search for communion with God directly. All that happened within us was God's work and this was not to be sought as something we could produce ourselves. The way of the mystics for Reformed theology was full of pitfalls taking us back to any number of forms of "works righteousness." "The just shall live by faith alone!" — but once again such faith, even though based "solely" on Scripture moved toward becoming a body of doctrinal knowledge intended to be believed and confessed even if not experienced. Still functioning within a state-church arena, this movement may have been inevitable.

It was therefore up to another major thrust of Christian leaders to take the next "radical" step toward "true reform." These were the Anabaptists and Protestant pietists.

"In general they looked to the Scriptures and especially the New Testament as their authority and tended to discard all they could not find expressly stated in that basic collection of sources. They wished to return to the primitive Christianity of the 1st Century. They thus rejected much more which had come through the Catholic church than did Lutherans and the Reformed. They believed in 'gathered' churches, not identical with the community at large, but composed of those who had had the experience of the new birth." 9.

I am personally indebted to Howard Snyders' new work on The Radical Wesley for rekindling much of my own interest in Radical Protestantism. It is obvious that the themes which played upon their heart strings eventually became significant to the searching heart of John Wesley as well. Notice Latourette's summary of the Anabaptist and Pietistic emphases. First, the Anabaptists:

"Rejecting infant baptism as contrary to the Scriptures, they regarded only that baptism valid which was administered to conscious believers. . . . Anabaptists had as little as possible to do with the state. . . . large numbers were convinced that the Christian should never participate in war. . . . their forms of worship were marked by simplicity. In its heyday the movement gave rise to many hymns. . . . many believed that in them a prophecy had been revived and that the Holy Spirit continued to guide and speak. . . . many were ardently missionary. . . . they tended to austerity in morals and simplicity in food, dress, and speech. Anabaptists maintained a high standard of immortality. . . . they expelled from their fellowship those who slipped away from their standards. . . . they endeavored fully to live up to the ethical demands of the Sermon On The Mount. The Catholic way of striving for Christian perfection was that of the monastery, communities of celibates apart from the world. The Anabaptist were kin to monks in seeking perfection in communities separate from the world, but, unlike the monks, they married." 10.

Second, the Pietists as launched by the life and teaching of Philip Jacob Spener.

"To it contributions came from the mysticism which we met in pre-Reformation Germany, from Luther, from English Puritanism, and possibly from the Anabaptist. . . . Spener was intent upon a moral and spiritual reformation. He was grieved by controversy over doctrine. . . . what he stressed was genuine conversion and the cultivation of the Christian life. To this end he discounted doctrinal sermons, preached the necessity of the new birth, a personal, warm Christian experience, and the cultivation of Christian virtues. He gathered the serious-minded into small groups, ecclesiolae in ecclesia—'little churches in the Church' he called them, for the reading of the Scriptures and for mutual assistance in spiritual growth. . . . he inculcated a self discipline which included abstinence from cards, dancing, and the theatre and moderation in food, drink and dress." 11.

The scene is set for the arrival of John Wesley and the movement called "Methodist."

### III.

#### WESLEY'S OWN VIEWS AND EXPERIENCE

Drawing primarily on Wesley's Works (Third Edition, Baker Bookhouse, 1978, reprinted from the 1872 edition issued by Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, London) I shall attempt to set forth in seven themes and a summary, Wesley's own views on the centrality of spiritual experience to the Christian life.

##### Theme 1: "Mysticism, A Fascination and A Fear"

There are abundant descriptions of Wesley's pilgrimage of faith related to both traditional Christianity (Catholic/Reformed/Anglican) and mysticism. But let me draw on Albert Outler's summary of Wesley's early thoughts relating both to the reformers and the mystics.

"For many years I have been tossed by various winds of doctrine. I asked long ago, 'what must I do to be saved' (Acts 16:30)? The Scripture answered, 'keep the commandments, believe, hope, love; follow after these tempers till thou has fully attained (that is, till death) by all those outward works and means which God hath appointed, by walking as Christ walked.' I was early warned against laying, as the papists do, too much stress on outward works—or on a faith without works; which, as it does not include, so it will never lead to, true hope or charity. Nor am I sensible that to this hour I have laid too much stress on either; having from the very beginning valued both faith and the means of grace and good works, not on their own account but as believing that God, who had appointed them, would them bring me in due time to the mind that was in Christ (Phil. 2:5). But before God's time was come, I fell among some Lutheran and Calvinists authors, whose confused and indigested account magnified faith to such an amazing size that it quite hid all the rest of the commandments. I did not then see that this was the natural effect of their overgrown fear of popery, being so terrified with the cry of merit and good works that they plunged at once into the other extreme. . . . These considerations insensibly stole upon me as I grew acquainted with mystic writers, whose notable descriptions of union with God and internal religion made everything else appear mean, flat and incipid. But, in truth, they made good works appear so, too; yea, and faith itself.

These gave me an entire new view of religion—nothing like any I had before. But, alas! It was nothing like that religion which Christ and his apostles lived and taught. I had a plenary dispensation from all the commands from God. The form ran thus: 'Love is all; all the commands beside are only means of love; you must choose those which you feel are means to you and use them as long as they are so.' . . . I fluctuated between obedience and disobedience. I had no heart, no vigor, no zeal in obeying; continually doubting whether I was right or wrong and never out of perplexities and entanglements. Nor can I at this hour give a distinct account how or when I came a little back toward the right way. Only, my present sense is this: all the other enemies of Christianity are triflers—the mystics are the most dangerous of its enemies. They stab it in the vitals, and its most serious professors are most likely to fall by them. May I praise him who hath snatched me out of this fire likewise, by warning all others that it was set on fire of hell." 1.

Perhaps the key expressions in Wesley's words are:

"The internal religion made everything else appear mean, flat and incipid,"  
"All other enemies of Christianity are triflers—the mystics are the most dangerous."

Here is seen clearly his fascination and his fear. His fascination is perhaps obvious. His fear of the mystics may not be quite so obvious. Wesley was most frightened by the constant danger in mysticism for: (1) The removal of justification by faith in the antonizing death of Christ, (2) Trusting in an inward self-righteousness apart from Scripture's witness to the essential sinful nature of humankind, (3) Retreat from the church gathered into isolated solitude for growth in the knowledge of God, and (4) Retreat from the world and deeds of charity and "social holiness." 2.

Theme 2: "A Quest For Inward Certainty of Faith."

Wesley's journey to Georgia and his encounter with Radical Protestant Pietism in the Moravians raised again in his heart and perhaps even his throat a lump which seemed impossible to swallow. He was "stuck" and frightened that his faith may indeed be all but worthless. Two accounts from his journals clarify his quest for certainty and his agony. In the first he recounts how on February 7, 1736 he spoke with Mr. Spangenberg about his quest.

"He said, 'My brother I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?' I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, 'Do you know Jesus Christ?' I paused, and said, 'I know he is the Saviour of the world.' 'True,' replied he; 'But do you know that he has saved you?' I answered, 'I hope he has died to save me.' He only added, 'Do you know yourself?' I said, 'I do.' But I feared they were vain words." 3.

Upon returning from Georgia Mr. Wesley was no more well off than while there. On January 8, 1738 he writes again in his journal:

"By the most infallible of proofs, inward feeling, I am convinced, of unbelief; having no such faith in Christ as will prevent my heart from being troubled; which it could not be, if I believed in God, and rightly believed also in him. . . . Lord, save, or I perish!" 4.

Theme 3: "Arrival At Certainty, Aldersgate and Beyond"

Perhaps all gathered here could recite Wesley's journal entry regarding the "Heart Strangely Warmed" experience of May 24, 1738. But our pilgrimage with Wesley cannot proceed without it. And perhaps it will be well that we are reminded again of his own preface to the actual description of that experience which he also records in his journal on the May 24, 1738 entry.

"In my return to England, January 1738, being in imminent danger of death and very uneasy on that account, I was strongly convinced that the cause of that uneasiness was unbelief; and that the gaining a true, living faith was the 'one thing needful' for me. But I still fixed not this faith on its right object. I meant only faith in God, not faith in or through Christ. Again, I knew not that I was wholly void of this faith; but only thought, I had not enough of it. So that when Peter Bohler, whom God prepared for me as soon as I came to London, affirmed of true faith in Christ, (which is but one,) that it had those two fruits inseparably attending it, 'Dominion over sin, and constant Peace from a sense of forgiveness,' I was quite amazed, and looked upon it as a new Gospel. If this was so, it was clear I had not faith." 5.

Wesley decided upon an experiment. First he would thoroughly consult Scripture seeking to prove that it would not support such a view of faith and as experience of peace and forgiveness. This failed and drove him to a second experiment. He asked Peter Bohler if he could actually produce living witnesses to this kind of faith. Bohler replied he could and would be happy to do so if Mr. Wesley desired it, the next day. The scene was almost completely set now for Wesley's transforming experience.

Accordingly, the next day he came again with three others, all of whom testified, of their own personal experience, that a true living faith in Christ is inseparable from a sense of pardon for all past, and freedom from all present, sins. They added with one mouth, that this faith was the gift, the free gift of God; and that he would surely bestow it upon every soul who earnestly and perseveringly sought it. I was now thoroughly convinced; and, by the grace of God, I resolved to seek it unto the end . . .

"In the evening I went quite unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. And about a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, 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." 6.

His heart was changed in an instant and like St. Paul it could not but transform his old understanding of what he was about. In actuality, little of his basic theology or practice changed except as necessitated gradually through additional "experience." What changed was his perception and expectancy of how God intends to have the earth "be filled with all the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." It was indeed to be by a "faith in the Lord Jesus Christ"—personal faith, Holy Spirit inspired and experienced faith.

Wesley is himself a changed man and convinced by experience of a new thrust that must be part of his proclamation of the gospel. He almost immediately begins to explore the matter further as well as to proclaim it to others. But the word is out. Wesley has become even more of a menace. He is departed from the true faith. And in the months and years that followed he is constantly set upon by his colleagues within the church to answer their questions regarding the nature of his enthusiastic madness. Thus, in a conversation with several colleagues on Monday, June 25, 1744 John Wesley sets forth the following answer to the question "What is faith?"

"Faith is in general a divine, supernatural elencos (evidence) of things not seen; that is, of past, future, or spiritual things: It is a spiritual sight of God and the things of God. First, a sinner is convinced by the Holy Ghost, 'Christ loved me, and gave himself for me.' This is that faith by which he is justified, or pardoned, the moment he receives it. Immediately the same Spirit bears witness, 'Thou art pardoned; thou hast redemption in his blood.' And this is saving faith, whereby the love of God is shed abroad in his heart." 7.

Faith for Wesley is a "divine evidence, bringing full conviction of an invisible eternal world." 8.

The Biblical witness, the witness of Plato, the witness of the early Christians, the witness of the early church fathers, yea and even the witness of the mystics, the Anabaptists and the Pietists had finally found its way into the witness and faith of John Wesley.

#### Theme 4: "The Nature of His Knowing"

As we now begin to speak of experience as central in Wesley's own thinking and thus in our Methodist heritage, we must clarify as much as possible what is meant by experience. Is it experience in general such as emotions and events of confirmation including the observation of change in one's habits and interests? Or is it the more direct and absolutely convincing knowledge of God as God? It would be hard to dispute after reading Wesley's works that there could be any more central conviction than the one that experience for Wesley is the direct experience of God, God's love, and God's assurance of our salvation through the Holy Spirit.

"I say, all religion is empty show, or perfection by inspiration; in other words, the obedient love of God, by the supernatural knowledge of God; yea, all that which 'is not of faith is sin;' all which does not spring from this loving knowledge of God; which knowledge cannot begin or subsist one moment without immediate inspiration; . . . Dost thou know what faith is? It is a loving, obedient sight of a present and reconciled God." 9.

But what is that faith through which we are saved, . . . an evidence, a divine evidence and conviction (the word means both) of things not seen; not visible, not perceivable either by sight or by any other of the external senses. It implies both a supernatural evidence of God, and of the things of God; a kind of spiritual light exhibited to the soul, and a supernatural sight or perception there of. . . . we see the spiritual world, which is all around about us, and yet no more discerned by our natural faculties than if it had no being; and we see the eternal world; piercing through the veil which hangs between time and eternity. Clouds and darkness then rest upon it no more, but we already see the glory which shall be revealed. Taking the word in a more particular sense, faith is a divine evidence and conviction, not only that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, but also that Christ

loved me, and gave himself for me." 10.

For Wesley the experience of faith was the knowledge of God, the love of God, that we are born of God, and that we have communion with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. 11. It leads to the only true happiness and is the only true religion. 12. Wesley was convinced that all of these forms of knowledge were indeed "direct" gifts of God, perceptions of the inner soul, assurances not arrived at by the working of the mind, but divine gifts received by a receptive heart, seen by the inner eye, heard by the inner ear, felt by a heart strangely warmed.

For Wesley salvation was intimately linked to this "born anew," "knowing," experience. There could be variety in how or how quickly it came to each individual, but it involved feeling, it was usually in an instant, it was direct and immediate, and could be known ultimately as being of God by both the inner witness itself and the fruits of righteousness which it produced.

"By salvation I mean, not barely, according to the vulgar notion, deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth. This implies all holy and heavenly tempers, and, by consequence, all holiness of conversation. . . . we cannot rightly serve God unless we love him. And we cannot love him unless we know him; neither can we know God unless by faith. Therefore salvation by faith is only, in other words, the love of God by the knowledge of God; or, the recovery of the image of God, by a true, spiritual acquaintance with him. . . . the first sowing of this seed I cannot conceive to be other than instantaneous; whether I consider experience, or the word of God, or the very nature of the thing;—however, I contend not for circumstance, but for the substance: If you can attain it another way, do. Only see that you do attain it; for if you fall short, you perish everlastingly." 13.

#### Theme 5: "Faith, Reason, and Experience"

Although Wesley highly trumpets faith as the direct experience of God upon the human soul bringing confident assurance and peace, he properly respects reason and will not proceed without it as he believes the mystics advise. Reason has its place. It shows us the content of faith.

"Is it not reason (assisted by the Holy Ghost) which enables us to understand what the holy Scriptures declare concerning the being and attributes of God? . . . it is by reason that God enables us in some measure to comprehend his method of dealing with the children of men; the nature of his various dispensations, of the old and new covenant, of the law and the gospel. It is by this we understand (his Spirit opening and enlightening the eyes of our understanding) what that repentance is, not to be repented of; what is that faith whereby we are saved; what is the nature and the condition of justification; what are the immediate and what the subsequent fruits of it. . . . in other words, what is the mind that was in Christ; and what it is to walk as Christ walked." 14.

But reason has its limits. By itself reason can only bring to us the means not the end of faith. It can describe the content but not give the power.

"But what can cold reason do in this matter? It may present us with fair ideas; it can draw a fine picture of love: but this is only a painted fire. And farther than this reason cannot go. I made the trial for many years. I collected the finest hymns, prayers, and meditations which I could find in any language; and I said, sung, or read them over and over, with all possible seriousness and attention. But still I was like the bones in Ezekiel's vision: 'The skin covered them above; but there was no breath in them.'" 15.

Reason by itself is powerless to produce either faith, hope or love and since these are the highest of Christian attributes and virtues, reason is extremely limited unless harnessed by the Spirit of God in the mind and heart of one reborn by the experience of God's saving and sanctifying grace.

But Wesley knew the danger of laying too much emphasis on either side. He wanted to be himself a mediator between those who under-valued reason and those who over-valued it. On the one side he placed the enthusiasts "who supposed the dreams of their own imagination to be revelations from God." 16. These he saw as silly and dangerous heretics to the true faith once and for all delivered to the saints. But on the other side were those who saw reason as the highest gift of God and the all-sufficient director of the children of men. He knew well this danger, for he had lived in it for many years before the warmth of God's love melted the coldness of his reasoned obedience. His understanding of experience was for Wesley the middle ground between cold reason and mad religious enthusiasm.

#### Theme 6: "Experience, Not Enthusiasm"

John Wesley was accused of being "an enthusiast." He would not accept the term, although he used it as a means to clarify what he did accept. Using the collects, offices, and homilies of the Church of England. He demonstrated that what he teaches and preaches is none other than what is officially taught by the Church of England itself. In so doing he frequently highlighted such words as feel, inspire, enlighten, stirring up, etc. Quoting from the homily for Rogation Week Part III he finishes with a denial of enthusiasm.

"God give us grace to know these things, and to feel them in our hearts! This knowledge and feeling is not of ourselves. Let us therefore meekly call upon the bountiful Spirit the Holy Ghost, to inspire us with his presence . . . in the power of the Holy Ghost resteth all ability to know God, and to please him." . . . every proposition which I have anywhere advanced concerning those operations of the Holy Ghost, which, I believe, are common to all Christians in all ages, is here clearly maintained by our own church. . . . to object enthusiasm to any person or doctrine is but a decent method of begging the question. It generally spares the objector the trouble of reasoning, and is a shorter and easier way of carrying his cause. But what does he mean by enthusiasm? Perhaps nothing at all: Few have any distinct idea of its meaning. Perhaps 'something very bad,' or 'something I never experienced and do not understand.' Shall I tell you then what that 'terrible something' is? I believe, thinking men mean by enthusiasm, a sort of a religious madness; a false imagination of being inspired by God: And by an enthusiast, one that fancies himself under the influence of the Holy Ghost, when, in fact, he is not. Let him prove me guilty of this who can." 17.

For Wesley enthusiasm in its purist sense would be an acceptable term for

his experience—"a divine impulse or impression, superior to all the natural faculties, and suspending for the time, either in whole or in part, both the reason and outward senses. In this meaning of the word, both the Prophets of old, and the Apostles, were proper enthusiasts." 18. But he recognizes that most accuse him of being an enthusiast meaning something evil, a disorder of the mind, an emotional heretic, a "religious madness arising from falsely imagined influence or inspiration of God; at least, from imputing something to God which ought not to be imputed to him, or expecting something from God which ought not to be expected from him." 19.

Since Wesley himself was uncomfortable with many of the more bizarre and "extraordinary" reactions of persons under the conviction and influence of the Holy Spirit, he understood their fear. Nevertheless, his test was always two fold—the direct witness of the Spirit, and the fruits of the Spirit being manifested in a changed life. "Let none ever presume to rest in any supposed testimony of the Spirit which is separate from the fruit of it," he wrote in his sermon "The Witness Of The Spirit." 20. Although Wesley allowed for extraordinary manifestations of God's presence through a variety of means (sudden outcries, dropping to the ground as if dead, 21. visions and dreams, 22. angel visitations 23. extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, 24. and a variety of other manifestations of the invisible world) he strongly believed that reason and the "ordinary" assistance of the Spirit were the more normal and to be trusted means of guidance to truth, knowledge of God, and faith.

"Trust not in visions or dreams; in sudden impressions, or strong impulses of any kind. Remember, it is not by these that you are to know what is the will of God on any particular occasion; but by applying the plain Scripture rule, with the help of experience and reason, and the ordinary assistance of the Spirit of God." 25.

Howard Snyder summarizes Wesley's commitment with the following statement.

"The 'Anglican triad' had 'in fact, become the Wesleyan quadrilateral' of Scripture, reason, tradition and experience, with Scripture as the 'norming norm' to be placed above all other authority. His experiential emphasis was guarded from pure subjectivism not only by his respect for Scripture but also by his emphasis on the witness of the Spirit, the work of the Holy Spirit testifying to and confirming the Word in present experience." 26.

In the best Reformation tradition Wesley was a man of the Book. Any experience contrary to the Biblical witness was neither important nor desirable. By this means he thought to separate himself from anything that could be called in general "enthusiasm" and align himself instead with what he came to regard as the true Christian experience, the religion of the heart, a life lived in harmony with the powerful and prompting grace of God through the Holy Spirit.

#### Theme 7: "The Work Of The Holy Spirit"

It may or may not be able to be argued that Wesley was an enthusiast, but unquestionably he was an experiential Pneumatist! Perhaps no other person in the last two-hundred and fifty years has written, preached and taught more about the Holy Spirit than John Wesley. For Wesley the Holy Spirit was the Christian life. Not as a doctrine to be believed but as an experience to be lived. The



Christian life was the experience of the Holy Spirit shed abroad in our hearts and transforming us from one degree of glory to another into the likeness of Christ.

"(H)owever it be expressed, it is certain all true faith, and the whole work of salvation, every good thought, word, and work, is all together by the operation of the Spirit of God." 27.

Wesley saw all of church history as a rising up to and a falling away from the power and centrality of the Holy Spirit. 28. Much like Jeremiah's vision of the new covenant Wesley saw that the Spirit was the means by which God sought to: (1) "Write my law on their hearts"—holiness of life in perfect love and entire sanctification, (2) "All shall know me"—the sure and direct knowledge of God as Abba, Father (assurance), and (3) "Forgiveness of their iniquity"—the knowledge that our sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ (justification and the new birth). 29.

'The ministration of the New Testament was that of a 'Spirit which giveth life;—a Spirit, not only promised, but actually conferred; which should both enable Christians now to live unto God, and fulfill precepts even more spiritual than the former; and restore them hereafter to perfect life, after the ruins of sin and death. The incarnation, preaching, and death of Jesus Christ were designed to represent, proclaim, and purchase for us this gift of the Spirit; and therefore says the Apostle, 'The Lord is that Spirit.'" 30.

For John Wesley Christian experience is the Holy Spirit. He was convinced that God intends this experience for all. For this end God raised up the Methodist, to spread this understanding and experience of "Scriptural holiness" through out the land.

#### A Summary:

As a summary it may well be worth allowing Wesley to speak for himself. In his sermon "Witness Of The Spirit" he sets forth a statement of the nature of the Methodist movement which seems to bring most of what we've been looking at into a final and focused form.

"It more nearly concerns the Methodists so called, clearly to understand, explain, and defend this doctrine; because it is one grand part of the testimony which God has given them to bear to all mankind. It is by his peculiar blessing upon them in searching the Scriptures, confirmed by the experience of his children, that this great evangelical truth has been recovered, which had been for many years well nigh lost and forgotten.

But what is the witness of the Spirit? . . . by the testimony of the Spirit, I mean, an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.

Meantime let it be observed, I do not mean hereby, that the Spirit of God testifies this by any outward voice; no, nor always by an inward voice, although he may do this sometimes. Neither do I suppose, that he always

applies to the heart (though he often may) one or more texts of Scripture. But he so works upon the soul by an immediate influence, and by a strong, though inexplicable operation, that the stormy wind and troubled waves subside, and there is a sweet calm; the heart resting as in the arms of Jesus, and the sinner being clearly satisfied that God is reconciled, that all his 'iniquities are forgiven, and his sins covered.'

The word of God says, everyone who has the fruit of the Spirit is a child of God; experience, or inward consciousness, tells me, that I have the fruit of the Spirit; and hence I rationally conclude, 'Therefore I am a child of God.' . . . nor do we assert, that there can be any real testimony of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit. We assert, on the contrary, that the fruit of the Spirit immediately springs from this testimony; not always indeed in the same degree, even when the testimony is first given; and much less afterwards. Neither joy nor peace is always at one's stay; no, nor love; as is neither is the testimony itself always equally strong and clear. But the point in question is this, whether there be any direct testimony of the Spirit at all; whether there be any other testimony of the Spirit, than that which arises from a consciousness of the fruit. I believe there is; because that is the plain, natural meaning of the text, 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.' 31.

#### IV.

##### THE PLACE OF EXPERIENCE IN EARLY METHODISM

If such a commitment to the centrality of the direct, personal witness of God's Spirit upon the human spirit could be restricted only to Wesley's experience and a few of his close friends, obviously the nature of what became the Methodist movement would have died quickly after its birth. This is precisely what Wesley believed happened to Lutheranism; it died a premature spiritual death because it returned to the cold doctrines of theology even before Luther himself had passed from the scene.

"Many that had once run well, turned back from the holy commandment delivered to them; yea, the greater part of those that once experienced the power of faith, made a shipwreck of faith and a good conscience. The observing this was supposed to be the occasion of that illness whereof Luther died; after uttering these melancholy words: 'I have spent my strength for nought! Those who are called by my name, are, it is true, reformed in opinions and modes of worship; but in their hearts and lives, in their tempers and practice, they are not a jot better than the Papists!'" 1.

John Wesley feared the same thing might happen to Methodism. In fact he acknowledged that all those who began the journey did not complete it. In speaking of several of the early preachers he writes:

"Several of them indeed increased in other knowledge, but not proportionately in the knowledge of God. They grew less simple, less alive to God, and less devoted to him. They were less zealous for God; and, consequently, less active, less diligent in his service. Some of them began to desire the praise of men, and not the praise of God only; some to be weary of a wandering life, and so to seek ease and quietness. Some began again to fear the faces of men; to be ashamed of their calling; to be unwilling to deny themselves, to take up their cross daily, 'and endure hardship as good soldiers of Jesus

Christ.' Wherever these Preachers labored, there was not much fruit of their labors. Their word was not, as formerly, clothed with power: it carried with it no demonstration of the Spirit." 2.

Above all else John Wesley feared "the deceitfulness of riches." 3. Frequently he reminded his preachers and the early Methodists of the need for a simple life. He was afraid that wherever riches increased it was almost automatic for the true religion of the heart to decrease.

But by and large early Methodism maintained its strength and its power in the Spirit. Through discipline and careful attention to right doctrine, Wesley held to his initial focus—the experience of faith. Hundreds and thousands of lives came to experience this faith. Let us then look at what these early Methodists themselves gave witness to.

Perhaps no single volume better captures the flow of early Methodism and the experience of the early Methodist people than that by Leslie F. Church, The Early Methodist People. He prefaces his chapter on their spiritual experience with this paragraph.

"It has often been said that Methodism contained nothing 'new' and this is perfectly true though it may disappoint the modern Athenians. Neither did it make any noteworthy and original contribution to the theological opinion of the 18th Century. This does not mean that Wesley was out of date in his philosophical approach to Truth. His appeal to the phenomena of experience was not discredited then, still less is it outmoded by the thought of our modern scientists and philosophers. As Dr. Workman has pointed out in his brilliant epitome of Methodism in Cambridge Manuals: 'In his appeal Wesley was one, however unconsciously, with the English philosophers, with one all-important difference. The philosophers had confined themselves almost exclusively to the intellectual factors. Wesley urged . . . an enlargement so as to embrace spiritual phenomena of the contents of the mind to which the philosophers applied their methods of introspection.' The spiritual experience was as real as the intellectual and could not be neglected or ignored by scientific or psychological investigators." 4.

Wesley's own search for the certainty of faith as experience led him to preach this pure gospel far and wide. Amazingly, at least at first to him, many believed, were converted, and like unto himself came to declare (often in a song) "my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed Thee." John Wesley was a born leader and an excellent organizer. As he trained and inspired his first small band of preachers, their plain words were likewise used with Wesleys as arrows of God's divine love piercing the hearts of thousands who heard them proclaim the gospel of hope.

"A layman, J. R. who wrote an interesting account of early Methodism, remarking on their differing education and qualifications, says: 'They all preach the same doctrines, and the invariable characteristics of their preaching were sincerity, simplicity and fervour. They believed and therefore they spoke as they did. They were themselves affected with the truths they uttered, and their hearers could not long remain unaffected.' That was the secret of their success. They had not been taught a theological system; they had caught spiritual experience. It had not been an easy spiritual pilgrimage for Wesley nor was it for his preachers. Though some of them entered quickly into a great joy, it is only necessary to read

their journals to discover something of the travail of their souls before they found peace. Once this was a reality they were able, by the grace of God, to direct other 'poor travelers' towards the same triumphant experience. They offered the fulness of God's grace to all men and gave them an intelligible interpretation of Arminian theology which 'marked one of the great advances in the liberation of the human spirit'. If this gospel of spiritual opportunity was not new, it was because it was based on the timeless teaching of Jesus.

The message beginning with Wesley was transmitted through his preachers to the common people. It did not remain a message with them, any more than with the messengers. It became a living and joyous experience." 5.

Early Methodists, following in the footsteps of their leader, had a liking for recording their spiritual struggles and victories. There is no lack of firsthand diary descriptions of their experiences. The task is more to categorize than it is to locate. This is itself a testimony to the significance of personal experience to the early Methodists. There was indeed little they believed that set them apart from other members of the Church of England except this focus on experience. George Osborn of Rochester though himself of quite a different temperament, records his father as saying "Methodism is Church of Englandism felt." 6.

At the heart of their experience and "feeling" was the Doctrine of Assurance. It seemed to many of their antagonists that any such announcement that one could know himself or herself to be a Christian, fully forgiven, fully accepted by God, was nothing less than impertinent arrogance and probably bordering on heresy. But Wesley and his preachers by and large answered the critics with arguments while the majority of the early Methodists answered only with their own witness to what they had come to know by experience.

"The basis of this assurance was always in the love of God and never in the work of man. 'I now venture my whole salvation upon Thee, as God,' said Hester Roe, and countless others said almost the same. It was often a long-drawn struggle which brought these people to this point when their joy overflowed—a struggle and a joy which the Deist neither understood nor really knew. The crisis, as in the case of the medieval saints, came through long seasons of prayer." 7.

They guarded themselves against privatism and undue subjective self-analysis by their healthy exchange of stories, opinions, and warnings in their class, band, and society meetings. Perhaps this was, as Wesley himself acknowledged in his letter to Reverend Mr. Perrone, 1748, "A method for which we have come to bless God ever since." 8. The class meeting and the class leaders perhaps more than any other single factor in early Methodism, kept these experientially oriented people constantly in touch with each other and thus freed them from the tendency for diverse experiences to divide them. Rather with all of its varieties, it united them and kept them vitally alive. Wesley himself feared isolationism as much as anything. He saw in it an open door to all the dangers of mysticism. Therefore, the class and band meetings kept the early Methodists open in relationship to each other, and another practice of Wesley and his preachers kept societies open to all of God's blessed activity in the world.

"The thing which I was greatly afraid of all this time, and which I resolved to use every possible method of preventing, was, a narrowness of Spirit, a party zeal, a being straitened in our own bowels; that miserable bigotry

which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves. I thought it might be a help against this, frequently to read, to all who were willing to hear, the accounts I received from time to time of the work which God is carrying on in the earth, both in our own and other countries, not among us alone, but among those of various opinions and denominations. For this I allotted one evening in every month; and I find no cause to repent of my labor. It is generally a time of strong consolation to those who love God, and all mankind for his sake; as well as of breaking down the partition-walls which either the craft of the devil or the folly of men has built up; and of encouraging every child of God to say, (Oh when shall it once be!) 'Whosoever doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same as my brother, sister, and mother.' 9.

Because of this early Methodist commitment to a corporate and catholic spirit, there was considerable tolerance regarding variety in the uniquely personal aspects of anyone's conversion. So many different personalities, backgrounds and temperaments were involved in this early generation of Methodists that no kind of uniform pattern can be described.

"Some were first influenced by the crudest fears of physical torment, others grew gradually into a consciousness of the love of Christ reaching down to their own small and insignificant lives. Though it is regrettable that a narrow interpretation of conversion had its evil results during the first years, it is astonishing to realize what a change it made to the life of England as a whole, and to so many individuals in particular. Whatever may have been the varying motives that brought men to face the issue, and how ever different may have been the manner of their conversion, the conditions fulfilled were exactly Scriptural—repentance and faith—and the result of every true conversion was a life so transformed that the converted man or woman was consciously striving to 'live in Christ,' as a new creature." 10.

Not only did the affect vary greatly from person to person, but also there was a growing variety in terms of the timing involved in one's conversion.

"Conversion, amongst the first Methodists, was not always instantaneous or cataclysmic. Perhaps in their preaching, too great a stress was laid on Time and this led to the belief in some quarters that the experience must be the occurrence of one transforming moment. It is obvious from the facts that the time factor was of little importance; the thing that mattered was the quality of the experience—the fulness of this consciousness of sin and the Saviour." 11.

But even in the midst of such a great acceptance of diversity, certain elements do emerge as the core of almost every early Methodist experience:

1. A strong sense or conviction of sin,
2. A passionate desire for reconciliation with God,
3. Deliverance through faith in Christ,
4. Beginning to live as new creatures. 12.

And to this list could also be added number (5) "A passion for souls." It seemed to be the most natural reaction that whoever himself or herself became a new creature, also became an evangelical witness for this same possibility in others. This was equally true for a Lady Maxwell as it was for a Cornish farmer by the name of John Nile.

"The truly converted man becomes, himself, an evangelist. That may be taken as axiomatic of the early Methodist conception of conversion." 13.

But this evangelism was not at all confined to merely calling persons to an initial "experience" of conversion or salvation in any simplistic sense. The truly converted person understood and boldly proclaimed that Methodism was about more than a passing "enthusiasm." It was about present salvation and growth in grace as well as pardon, forgiveness, and future salvation in the life to come.

Thus a sixth common aspect among them (and closely related to number 4 above) was their quest and their varied experiences related to "Christian Perfection."

"In considering the less reserved confessions of some of the rank and file it must be remembered always that their leader urged them to expect, to seek and to record the experience. Again and again he heard or read their claims, corrected or approved them, by word or letter, and often rejoiced with them in their triumphant joy. . . . The personal accounts of many early Methodists are detailed and quite definite. In examining them one is compelled to conclude that, when they speak of sanctification they describe a real experience, and to be quite sure in one's own heart, that if these people reached such a stage, then John Wesley, also 'attained.' Perhaps for the sake of the church, and his own sake, he remained silent about himself, but there can be no question that he rejoiced with a great joy in the blessings experienced by his children in the Gospel." 14

As time went on the numbers of those claiming this experience multiplied. Wesley noted there were 652 in London alone between the years 1759 and 1763. He records in his journal for Wednesday, March 12, 1760 the following account of an investigation of such claims while visiting in Leeds.

"Having desired that as many as could of the neighboring towns, who believed they were saved from sin, would meet me, I spent the greatest part of this day in examining them one by one. The testimony of some I could not receive; but concerning the far greatest part, it is plain, (unless they could be supposed to tell wilful and deliberate lies,) 1. That they feel no inward sin; and to the best of their knowledge they commit no outward sin: 2. That they see and love God every moment and pray, rejoice, give thanks ever more: 3. That they have constantly as clear a witness from God of sanctification as they have of justification. Now in this I do rejoice, and will rejoice, call it what you please; and I would to God thousands had experienced thus much: Let them afterward experience as much more as God pleases." 15.

Wesley thus described the basic ingredients of the experience expected and found by many of the early Methodists. The durability of this experience depending on the response of their lives to each new day. John Wesley himself repeatedly said that the heart of such perfection was "the love of God and our neighbor; the image of God stamped on the heart; the life of God in the soul of man; the mind that was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ also walked." 16.

There were no doubt imposters and dissoluted souls among those who claimed not only this experience of sanctification but also of true justification in the Methodist understanding. Not all walked as Christ walked. Some slipped away from both their conversion and their sanctification experiences. But by and large they were an amazing lot, proving by their transformed lives that God was truly present

in a wonderful and powerful way within them. What they experienced was expected by their faith, and also by their faith it was claimed and proclaimed as well. The results were overwhelming. They were indeed living as new creatures in a new world.

In summary, these words from Leslie Church draw the first era of the Methodist movement to a close and open to us the next.

"The ordinary Methodist people entered into an extraordinary spiritual experience, and, having been led by John Wesley to its threshold, they accepted him as interpreter and guide. He combined the functions of a pedagogue who led them to Christ, and of the tutor, who, afterwards, gave personal and loving oversight to their progress and conduct in the Christian Way.

The ideal he continually set before them in speech in the written word, and, above all, in his life, influenced their development, especially in its early stages. Later, they began to make their own decisions and shape their several courses." 17.

## V.

### HISTORICAL TRANSITIONS REGARDING THE PLACE OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE IN METHODISM

John Wesley and his 18th Century Methodist family made only a few adjustments to what was basically the shape of the movement from its beginnings in 1738-1739. It was indeed a reformation movement with the declared purpose of reforming individuals, the church, and the nation--"spreading Scripture holiness."

Wesley knew both by a study of history and by his own experience that it was not in the nature of things for any movement of true religion, Scriptural religion, to continue for long. Just five years before his death he wrote the following "Thoughts Upon Methodism."

"I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, Spirit, and discipline with which they first set out. . . . the essence of (Methodism) is holiness of heart and life; the circumstantial all point to this. And as long as they are joined together in the people called Methodists, no weapon formed against them shall prosper. But if even the circumstantial parts are despised, the essential will soon be lost. And if ever the essential parts should evaporate, what remains will be dung and dross.

It nearly concerns us to understand how the case stands with us at the present. I fear, wherever riches have increased, (exceeding few are the exceptions,) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce

riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and the love of the world in all its branches." 1.

Wesley's voice may well have been a prophetic one. Certainly "riches" alone have not brought us to the present state of Methodism (I must speak only for what I know of American United Methodism), a state which I fear is in many ways void of a serious understanding or experience of early Methodism's "Scriptural religion." By and large we are divided into rival camps each one holding its own small segment of the unified truth and more often than not unwilling bring either an existing member or our new "professions of faith" (I hesitate to say "converts" in the classical Wesleyan sense) to a true appreciation of either "Christian experience" or "holiness." To say the very least we have ceased the practice of and probably lost the vision of winning the world to the Methodist experience of God's reconciling love in Christ, and God's redemptive purpose for his people in society through the power of the Holy Spirit.

It will be impossible, even as I confine this survey essentially to a North American History of Methodism, to trace in any detail what has brought us to this present state. Several issues are worthy of at least a brief look. The early years of Methodism in America were years of great expansion. After the Christmas Conference in December of 1784, there is only one decade between the year 1790 and 1860 where we were not growing at a faster pace than the population as a whole. The years 1800 to 1810 were exceptional. They saw a 167% increase in Methodist membership--a full 133% greater growth than our new nation's total population. But even this great success was not without its problems. Things were different on the American frontier than they had been back in England. For one thing, England (and therefore to a great degree John Wesley himself) were by necessity left behind. The fledgling offspring of American Methodism had to learn to live on its own. Live it did, and flourish! But its campmeeting/revival/itinerant style created problems as well as bringing multitudes into an evangelistic harvest. Expansion to all the edges of the frontier stretched the training, organization, and disciplinary elements of Methodism to its limits. Often the new converts were left to shift for themselves for weeks or months at a time. The results were not always gratifying. The American "melting pot" made it difficult for anything that was pure to remain pure for long.

Things were going well for most Americans. Wealth began to be on the increase. The American dream was becoming a reality for many of the new immigrants. Towns grew to become cities. Isolated communities began to be linked with one another as well as to the new urban centers. Methodists began to take a keener interest in society and the problems prevalent in the growing cities. By 1820 Methodism was beginning to reflect more and more the total mood of the nation. It began to find conflicts within its own body regarding doctrinal emphases. These differences were large enough to make some people begin to talk of schism. Temperance, slavery, education, leisure diversions, missions, and the administration of the organization became vital areas of concern sharing some of the spotlight with evangelism.

The rest of the 19th Century is the story of potential trouble coming full term. The issue of slavery divided the nation and eventually the Methodist church. The Civil War brought significant political involvement in both the North and the South. Reconstruction after the war was a challenge readily accepted, at least by the North. "No holiness but social holiness" came increasingly to mean involvement in society for Northern Methodists, social action. For the South, "social holiness" was still mostly a matter of personal habits. But in both halves of the church--divided social evils occupied an increasingly more noticeable place

in the preaching and teaching of the church.

Central to the whole heart of the issue for Methodists during these years was indeed the meaning and practice of "holiness." Wesley himself had warned, "give up the doctrine of entire sanctification, and you will easily slide into formality." 2. The solution sought by some was a return to what they believed their true heritage had meant by the doctrine. They insisted on a "second blessing." They saw holiness as essentially a personal experience with the Holy Spirit and they tended to withdraw from many of the larger social ills and stay with the more personal social habits necessary for a holy life. No doubt they were more in line with Wesley's own thinking than some of their counterparts. Many of these "personal holiness" persons split off and established whole new "Holiness" denominations. Others stayed within the church but increasingly as an uncomfortable minority. Out of those who left eventually emerged the whole pentecostal movement and Wesley's focus on experience ran its "natural" course toward a Holy Spirit centered religion without the Methodist boundaries of tradition or reason. Even Scripture seemed to be subject to experience in this new offspring of Wesley's focus on the Spirit. His own experience and social holiness had been changed to holy experience—not by any means the same.

On the other side of the "holiness" fence were those increasingly convinced that "social holiness" was a natural handmaiden of the social gospel. With a decreasing emphasis on personal aspects of "perfection" and a growing emphasis on the possibility of social progress, early 20th Century "liberals" went forth to accomplish what Wesley apparently had left undone—challenging the very heart of social evil (as they saw it) the unjust social systems. Gradually, however, a dye was being cast. Personal religiousness experience and holiness were rising up on one side, and social religious experience and holiness were rapidly shaping up on the other. People were making choices—a personal gospel or a social gospel. We were into the 20th Century tensions and Christian experience as Wesley understood it was being strained almost to the breaking point.

With a growing industrialization and advance of science in the 19th Century ideas began to ferment among American intellectuals which led Charles Pierce to become the father of American pragmatism. His training was in science and mathematics, but he belonged to a rather elite group in Cambridge, Massachusetts known as the Metaphysical Club (including Oliver Wendell Holmes and William James) and developed keen philosophical interests as well. In 1877 he published "The Fixation Of Beliefs" in which he sought to demonstrate that:

"Beliefs are reinforced as long as we get expected results. When there is a breakdown, we have to stop and reconsider. Inquiry begins where beliefs break down . . . To claim certainty for religious beliefs or theological doctrines on the basis of either personal feeling, appeals to authority, or rational institutions is unsound and in the longrun detrimental to religious life." 3.

American religion in general and Methodism in particular was soon to feel the effects of Pierce's reasoning, even if his name was known by few of them. The age of science and a neo-rationalism was upon us. Experience itself had turned a corner toward pragmatism. Wesley was a pragmatist, but only secondarily. Experience first and foremost for Wesley was power only when it was harnessed to Scripture. Experience in America was now becoming the quest for, not the arrival at, truth and reality. True scientific method learns to escape the embarrassing and often disastrous consequences of pronouncing a claim to be certain only to have it

contradicted later by another experience. Fewer and fewer American Methodists were in any way comfortable with their experiential heritage regarding "entire sanctification," and although they searched for other replacements, few were anywhere near as permanent as Wesley's original had been—even if it had not been totally adequate for another age and another place.

The emphasis was more and more on experiment and education, not raw, emotional, religious experience. There were too many chances for embarrassment. Take it slow and easy.

"Methodism became a cross section of the world being led on the way to salvation by the path of Christian nurture rather than by way of catastrophic and instantaneous conversion 4. . . . In 1867 J. M. Gregory declared in the *Sunday School Teacher* that the first aim of the Sunday school should be the conversion of the pupils . . . The passage of time has weakened this emphasis and strengthened instead a reliance of the developing sense of the love of God as ministered through the nurturing Christian community. 5.

Early Methodism centered its classes around experience, but 19th and 20th Century Methodists in America had learned to center classes around something "taught" rather than "caught."

"The rise of Methodism to middle-class status was partly a matter of wealth, but also a matter of cultural outlook . . . worship became soberer and more formalized; disciplinary procedures lost their rigor; revivalism declined in favor . . . and finally, the Methodist churches became less appealing to the common people." 6.

Perhaps Wesley was right, "riches" lead true religion of the heart to having a form without the power.

A verbal commitment to experience (the form) still continued. The Episcopal Address to the General Conference of 1944 affirmed experience as central to Methodism.

"The fact that Methodist theology revolves about personal experience is clear. The salvation in which Methodists believe means much more than the forgiveness of actual sins and entrance into a heaven of eternal bliss after death. It means a personal experience of God beginning with conversion and continuing every step of the way to perfect love." 7.

But fewer and fewer of the common folks in the pews (or even their preachers) understood this statement as something about their own experience. Therefore, by 1959 when 357 Methodist churches and 5020 individuals answered a 44 item questionnaire sponsored by the Board of Social Economic Relations and Boston University School of Theology, only 34.6% described the church as "the community of those who have been renewed by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit." Almost as many, 30.4%, answered that the church was "a society of those who had joined together in their quest (emphasis mine) for the religious life." 8.

This leads S. Paul Schilling to comment:

"Thus real doubt arises with respect to the large number who stress personal Christian experience. It seems all together likely that some of them are not voicing their own considered judgment, but simply expressing approval of what they think Methodists are supposed to believe." 9.

There can be little doubt that essentially we have returned to a pre-Aldersgate, pre-experience, pre-Holy Spirit Methodism. It still merits the name since "Methodists" existed and were actually slandered by that expression prior to Aldersgate. But if it is ever again to be what Methodism was in its years of greatest contribution to the world, it will have to make its own peace with the nature of experience both related to justification and sanctification. More than likely this cannot be a simplistic return to a former day. It is a different world in many ways than was Wesleys. But we have the same God, the same Lord, the same Spirit. What is our future? Where will we discover this key to God's power at work in our own personal lives as well as in society? The need is as great today as ever it has been before.

## VI

THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN  
SOCIAL/SPIRITUAL/ECCLESIASTICAL CONTEXT

It was impossible in the last section to trace all of the significant influences on Methodism's perceptions of experience. Indeed, one of the most important developments, that of theology itself, was brushed over almost entirely. Perhaps a brief analysis of this arena would be helpful now.

In 1960 when S. Paul Schilling published Methodism and Society In Theological Perspective he observed that the "Neo-Reformation/Realistic" (his construct to describe Neo-Orthodoxy) theology was the one that dominated our American Protestant and Methodist Seminaries.<sup>1</sup> There is no need to recount how Neo-Orthodoxy emerged out of a dead or dying, post World War, humanistic liberalism. The unrealistic optimism of classical liberalism just didn't work! So, in a pragmatic and modern West, we moved on to try something else.

The return to a form of Orthodoxy was gladly received by most Reformed and Wesleyan groups. It seemed to remind us that the initiative had to always remain with God, the God who had indeed interceded in the world before—most uniquely in Jesus Christ—could and would do it again at whatever time and place He chose. For many, Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing seemed the way to go—explaining everything "supernatural" or "spiritual" in terms of mythical religious themes and the human tendency to categorize events and seek an ultimate meaning. But Bultmann moved us further away not closer to our own Biblical and Wesleyan heritage, giving no "real" possibility for "actual" experiential encounter with God as Holy Spirit.

Barth moved us one step closer by rejecting reason or philosophy as an aid to finding God. God reveals God. God is not found. Where does God reveal God? In the Bible, God's true Word. Morton Kelsey comments on both of these men and their theologies and accurately lays bare the heart of the theological problem.

"In actual practice there is not much choice between Barth and Bultmann in what Christians can expect from the church today. Barth would be as dubious as Bultmann about the possibility of finding interations between matter and spirit today like those described in the pages of the New Testament. Barth believed that these amazing things did happen during the one great breakthrough, but you can't expect them now. Bultmann maintains that they simply don't happen at all, then or now.

And yet modern American Christianity is shaped to a large measure by the

thinking of these two men. Probably the great majority of Protestant Seminaries teach the basic framework of one of these two men, and their influence is also extending to Catholic theologians as well. Is it any wonder that ministers who come out of school with this attitude thoroughly ingrained have nervous breakdowns when they try to deal with the problems of actual men? And if ministers, or other Christians, do develop psychological problems, the church and its ministry cannot help, because their task is, they believe, only to refer such people to a psychologist or psychiatrist." 2.

But things have been changing theologically perhaps in spite of or because of no one distinctive theological voice or pen adequate to our needs. In 1972 Frederick Sontag and John Roth published the American Religious Experience and summarized the two decades between 1950 and 1970 as follows:

"In examining the rapid religious growth and expansion of the churches which occurred in the 1950s William McLoughlin and Robert Bellah termed this another 'Great Awakening' and thought the whole society was reoriented by this religious turn. In looking back now, however, we see that growth as partly due to the happy union of (1) The national ideal to provide a comfortable future for all and (2) Religious institutional support of this aim . . .

Clearly our notion of God drops into chaos as the country falls into confusion, because the two were so closely linked in what Bellah called our civil religion. Thus the interesting fact is that a new, and perhaps more profound, notion of God may appear as one positive result from this era of national turmoil and destruction.

'Spirituality' as a term was abandoned by academic religionists in the first two-thirds of the 20th Century. 'Transcendence' seemed to disappear too. Why, then, has the search for transcendence by drugs if necessary, recently burst in upon the scene so disruptively? Because, if society's goals can become unachievable or its culture intolerable, the human spirit can no longer identify with it as the naturalists had hoped. Spirit bursts out, seeking release, so that religion in a time of social revolution is forced to re-examine new possibilities for the development of the spiritual side of man. A disillusioned American becomes either rigid in his defense of former goals or cynical and defeatist—or he amazes a blatantly secular culture by his intense exploration of long-dormant spiritual dimensions." 3.

Into this hungering void stepped many options: drugs, Eastern mysticism, the occult, a new scientific and science fiction fascination, etc. Theologically there was an explosion of new interest in the mystical, the experiential, the transcendent, the charismatic, and the "born again" evangelical. Roman Catholic contemplatives like Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen were discovered or re-discovered. "Spiritual formation" has become a new phrase in use almost everywhere, and meaning either everything, or almost nothing. Dean Kelley, a Methodist working for the National Council of Churches explores the whole phenomenon of why conservative churches are growing and concludes that they are making the most sense for people out of religious experience and thereby explaining the meaning of life.

"If a religion should set out deliberately to benefit the whole society by patrotic preaching or welfare services or social action, but did not make life meaningful for its members, it would benefit the whole society less

than if it had contented itself with ministering its unique function to those who looked to it for that ministry." 4.

Perhaps in a way that is yet to be fully appreciated American Methodism was also finding a new ecumenical movement afoot. It was an ecumenical movement of spirit taking place along side the old ecumenical movement of form. The Charismatics had arrived. A full 18% or more of United Methodists now identify themselves with this movement. A Holiness Pentecostal Evangelist/Healer begins a university, and later a seminary, attracting more Methodist students than any other single denomination. And together with another Holiness/Wesleyan Seminary is turning out every year hundreds of new United Methodist clergy fully acquainted with an oriented toward the centrality of experience in a Christian life. Things are definitely changing!

This is true of course in many other arenas besides those claimed by the church. The whole society is being bombarded today by an openness to the "spiritual." Famed psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross published in 1969 her research on Death and Dying. Her colleague, a medical doctor and a Methodist, Raymond Moody then published an immediately popular book summarizing the experiences of those who have gone to the edge of death and returned. Literally millions of Americans find themselves wondering about this new evidence on the immortality of the human spirit.

A new interest is revived in spiritualism, the parapsychic, the occult, astrology, etc. One book and movie, "The Exorcist," sends the whole nation into an uproar. People who see this film, "experience" it. They don't just attend it. A flood of books and films and magazine articles and television specials begin pounding the questions at millions of Americans every day. What about the UFO's? What about Uri Geller? Do you believe in dreams? Have you ever had an experience with a ghost? What is science and what is science fiction? Star Wars becomes the biggest box office success of any film ever. In the midst of all of this there are three times as many spiritualists, palm readers, and astrologists functioning in the United States as there are ministers, priests, and rabbis.

Medicine and science enter the arena usually reserved for theology and science fiction. Infrared photographs of departed (dead) yet present spirits are shown on national network television. The "big bang" theory of the creation of the universe seems impossible to accept by scientists yet hard for astronomers to deny. Bio-feedback and alpha wave measuring devices demonstrate the actual power of the human mind and peace. The shroud of Turin, long dismissed by all but conservative Roman Catholics as anything but one of the "usual relics" is suddenly researched literally from head to toe by a team of world ranking scientists, some of whom exclaim—"My God!" Kerlian photography demonstrates that auras actually exist, and that halos may not be simply archaic art forms. Holistic medicine and Jungian psychology make faith/healing an acceptable union.

What has happened? The arch enemies of twenty years ago are suddenly wondering together what kind of universe it really is. Are we somehow into the dawning of the age of Aquarius?

Somehow in the midst of all of this it is no surprise to read in Carl Dudley's new book Where Have All Our People Gone; New Choices For Old Churches these comments about the "New Believers" in and outside of our churches.

"Many believers who do not belong to churches have often been bolder with their affirmations of a spiritual experience. While the pulpit still duelled

against the corrosive effects of scientific methodology and logical reductionism, New Believers quietly explored the spiritual experience that had come upon them. The old battle between science and religion seems past, and the New Believers cannot remember the lines of conflict or the champions of either side. When a person is touched by a mystical experience, then the 'sacred' is inseparable from the 'secular.' The spiritual experience has a way of synthesizing a creating, providential god with the productivity this generation takes for granted.

New Believers often have a flexibility in their faith that makes a mockery of old formulas. They can twist intellectual doubts and skepticism into an ally of faith, for 'what else is there to believe in?' The traditional forms of forgiveness provide the old believer with a freedom from sin. But the New Believer has often suspended the rules, so that faith seems to offer a freedom 'to sin,' in pursuit of the highest goal: personal religious experience. Traditionally, God is transcendent and humanity is present, but the New Believer explores the opposite experience, where God is really present and humans are the transcendent beings. As one believer explained at a late night party. 'God is here, Man, and I am everywhere. It's a trip!'

Frequently, the experience of faith is so real to the New Believer that churches seem irrelevant and sometimes hypocritical." 5.

These late 20th Century non-belonging New Believers are looking for a community of faith. They are on a journey, questing, and finding, often on their own, the experience of faith. It is not yet Christian faith for all of them, but it is real, experiential faith. They are searching for people who also know what they are talking about and are yet open enough to accept what is their first principle of faith—personal religious experience.

"They do not feel right about belonging to a group that deprives members of their individuality. Groups are expected to provide a way for each member to find personal fulfillment and continual growth. Groups must be based on the willing heart and continued satisfaction. . . . The sense of community suggests one basis of difference in the faith of those who belong and those who do not. New Believers base their faith in their own mystical religious experience. Mainline church members are more likely to lay claim to a flow of religious experience that predates their entry and which will continue long after they have gone. Mainline church members emphasize the historic quality of their faith but often communicate a personal flatness. New Believers can express the depth of their personal religious experience but often reflect an indifference to history. The differences in these two perspectives are difficult to cross, since each sees shadows where the other see light." 6.

The challenge is before us. It is of special interest to those of us whose faith and heritage is experientially Methodist. What do we offer this new age? What do we offer these new seekers after faith? Bread or a stone? If D.T. Niles was right, "evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread;" and if we can both describe the path and also walk it with the hungry seekers; and if we know that no heart is truly satisfied until it feeds on the Bread of Life, who is Jesus Christ the Lord; and if we can help lift this Bread to the mouths of those already touched preventently by God's Spirit and grace; and if we are neither frightened nor frantic about the whole area of religious experience but rather see it as the primary means to the true end of Scriptural and social holiness (whole-ness);

we have a very bright future before us. But if we ourselves are not first re-converted, if necessary, to the centrality of experience in the Methodist heritage, we will lose perhaps our greatest opportunity in 200 years to be God's people for God's world.

## VII.

INQUIRIES AND PROPOSALS FOR RECAPTURING THE CENTRALITY  
OF  
EXPERIENCE IN OUR METHODIST WITNESS AND EVANGELISM

## A Personal Witness

As I bring to a conclusion these many pages of exploration concerning the place of experience in our Methodist heritage, it might be well for me to briefly share a bit of my own experience. It is my conviction that most, if not all of us (as did the early New Testament Christians and religious persons of every age), shape our theologies as much by our experience as we allow a given theology to shape our experience.

I must confess an interest in the things of God from an early age, although my family attended no church until I was nine and began to ask questions regarding the meaning of being a Christian and being baptized. A young newly baptized Christian friend of mine had witnessed to me and prompted these questions. I was baptized in a Presbyterian Church in Flint, Michigan at the age of ten, being as serious about my commitment as I knew how. My search was real even if my experience was still extremely limited.

In 1953 at the age of eleven, we moved to Bay City, Michigan and became members of a Methodist Church. When I was thirteen my older sister attended a high school summer church camp sponsored by the Detroit Annual Conference of the Methodist Church and led mostly by Asbury Theological Seminary graduates. These pastors with a Holiness background had no difficulty challenging young people to commitment to Christ and the experience of God's grace in the Holy Spirit. My sister returned home witnessing to a significant change in her life accomplished by just such a commitment and experience of God's love. Although I did not understand, nor did she, all that was implied by her experience, I was hungry to have such an experience of my own, and the next summer attended that camp myself. This was to be my first encounter with "religious experience." After sitting quietly in a chapel for nearly an hour before rising to take communion, I finally "felt my heart strangely warmed." It was an emotional moment filled with joy, peace, and a sense of warm love flooding through me. The hours and days that followed were almost equally rich in a sense of God's presence. However, when I returned to my home church, my witness was greeted with either a very calm acceptance or half-hearted smiles which communicated to me: "We're happy for you, but youth are obnoxiously emotional anyway, and we know that what you are feeling won't last; it's just a passing adolescent bit of "enthusiasm."

And it did pass. No one clarified it for me or linked that early experience either to Scripture or directly to salvation through Jesus Christ. I had "experienced" God's love. I had discovered God to be real and come to know something of his love for me as my Heavenly Father; but I was not yet Christian, at least not in Wesley's sense, nor even in my own perceptions of myself.

As I entered college in 1960 I did so as a faithful Methodist young person active

in church and committed to God. My faith was to be challenged significantly during the next two years by both professors and fellow students who held no appreciation for either "religious experience" or the Christian faith in general. I knew I could not deny the reality of my experience, but since it had no deep Scriptural or even theological roots, it became detached from any truly orthodox Christian perspectives. Thus, when a close Jewish friend of mine became a Christian through the ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ, I was stunned. "Why would he do that," I puzzled. Through his new Christian witness to me and eventually through Campus Crusade for Christ itself, I found a new and sure rationale for my former experience, was confronted with a "repent, believe in Christ, and receive him into your heart" challenge, and I responded. I was finally "converted" to Christ and securely attached to Scripture. Many problems and questions remained, but my hungry soul had finally found the light of heaven through salvation in Jesus Christ.

Fellowship with others committed to this "evangelical" gospel led to a kind of dislocation from many of my Methodist associations. I was hungry for "Biblical" preaching and wanted to be part of a movement of those who worked hard to bring this experience to others. I was trained in using "The Four Spiritual Laws" (a Campus Crusade for Christ witnessing approach), and to my amazement found that I could be used by Christ to bring others to faith in him and the experience of conversion. There was no greater joy I could imagine than being an effective tool in the hands of God for the salvation of others. This eventually led me to the decision to enter seminary.

It was during these same days of transition in my life that my sister, my brother-in-law (a Polish Roman Catholic), my mother and my father were all being influenced by the new Charismatic movement. I knew little of it and in many ways was frightened by it, but their lives were also being dramatically changed by God's powerful grace. They talked more of "Jesus" and of the "Holy Spirit" than of "Christ in my heart" as did my evangelical friends in Campus Crusade for Christ. I discovered there were significant differences of theology and expression even among those who had essentially the same end in mind. The stretching of my own theological and psychological perspectives was under way.

I entered Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California and found the tension of "Christian experience, Biblical theology, and reason" to be an active dynamic across much of the evangelical church. I had begun to identify by this time to some degree with a Charismatic experience even though I never found myself entirely comfortable with either some of their methods or their emphasis on "tongues" as the sure sign of baptism in the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, it was clear to me that no matter how we said it, "the Lord is the Spirit." In spite of theological and linguistic clashes between self-labeled "liberals, conservatives, fundamentalists, evangelicals, neo-orthodox, Charismatics, etc.", I realized they were united in one central agreement—"through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, people can have a personal experience of God's saving grace through his Holy Spirit who floods through their inner consciousness." Conversion as justification was now confirmed for me theologically as well as experientially. However, the issue of sanctification was much more problematically for me during these days. In a personal interview with Bishop Gerald Kennedy regarding my struggle with a Methodist concept of "Perfection, he replied, "Well, can you think of anything better to go on to?" It seemed obvious to me that any serious consideration of this Methodist doctrine would have to wait.

In the twenty years or so since 1960 I have witnessed the gospel of Jesus Christ transform the lives of people in many countries and cultures. I have seen tribal people in the jungles of Viet Nam and junior executives in the jungles of Los Angeles experience God's Holy Spirit. In 1969 I joined Dr. Maxie D. Dunnam on the staff of



a United Methodist Church in Anaheim, California. For three years we together shaped a ministry committed to this "Methodist heritage." In 1972 I began pastoring a United Methodist Church in Phoenix, Arizona. More on my own as the sole pastor of this small congregation I began the practice of keeping a journal, a habit which I continue to this day (sometimes sporadically) and find it to be an enormous assistance in evaluating my experience and my growth in grace. During these years in Phoenix I became aware of a Methodist colleague who was decidedly mystic/Charismatic/psychic in his orientation. For more than twenty-five years he had been part of a "Spiritual Frontier's Fellowship." Edgar Cayce, Arthur Ford, and other psychics and mystics were his "friends" in the faith. He believed with all his heart and mind that "perfection" — "being transformed into the likeness of Christ from one degree of glory to another," was indeed a reality, and that the United Methodist Church had better get on with proclaiming it as such or be left behind. New experiences and possibilities began to enlarge my views regarding Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. What was it that God had in mind for his whole creation through open, committed, liberated minds, hearts, and bodies?

In 1977 I responded to an invitation to join the Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee as part of the staff in the Section on Evangelism as Director of Local Church Evangelism. For the last five years I have focused my work on teaching principles of church growth, but always with a desire to bring a more thoroughly Methodist flavor to this new evangelistic movement. During the last three years I have witnessed a radical upsurge in peoples' interest in prayer and spiritual formation. I have led several local church, district, and conference retreats in this area, and taught graduate level courses on "Evangelism and Prayer: Partners in Spiritual Formation." I have participated in the Cursillo movement and found it to be an exciting tool fitted well to our Methodist heritage to bring deeper Christian experience and commitment through the intentional dynamics of the small group where discipline, doctrine, and spirit are intentionally explored.

With the invitation to prepare this working paper I find myself bringing much of my own Christian experience and tradition to an exploration of the place of experience in our Methodist heritage. Thus, I now raise the question, what will the future look like for those of us who name the name? Will we also claim the power?

#### INQUIRIES:

1. Are we as Methodists ready to reclaim a strong and distinctive witness to the centrality of experience in the Christian faith?
2. Are we ready to train our pastors and laity to be distinctively and enthusiastically "Methodists" in their witness and teaching regarding the central experiences of our heritage, or will we give an ever increasing authority to "pluralism" without a unity of a common heart-felt faith? That is, will we make of Wesley's Catholic spirit a demand to "give me your hand" without acknowledging the significance of "if your heart be as mine?"
3. What will our seminaries do to provide a theological base for and practical involvement in an "experience-centered evangelism" as that involves witnessing, preaching, and teaching?
4. Will we call on all Methodist Bishops to make "Recovering the Experience of our Methodist Heritage" a world-wide focus in this decade?
5. Will we risk calling our own people (members of Methodist churches) as well as non-believers to conversion as experience and expect them to respond,

or will we continue a nurture-process orientation to evangelism?

6. Will we begin as Wesley did with an appeal to original sin as the starting place for conversion, or will we develop new approaches that take anxiety more as the central experiential core of alienation in the 20th Century?
7. What will Methodism acknowledge as valid and acceptable "spiritual experience" in the coming years in light of recent developments in science, medicine, psychology, para-psychology, etc.?
8. How will we eventually begin to define and program opportunities for "spiritual formation"? Will we seek to bring the historical Methodist experiences of "new birth" and "sanctification" into this definition? Will we clarify the meaning of "entire sanctification" along the lines of Abraham Maslow's "self-actualization" psychology or Jung's personality profiles and perspectives on the reality of a "spiritual realm"?
9. What will Methodism offer as its best theological reflection on the Charismatic renewal movement?
10. What will we learn from the ethnic and third world Methodist experiences, and how will we communicate these exciting strengths and perspectives to mainline Western Methodism?
11. Can we bring resolve to the tension between the personal and social meanings of "holiness"?
12. What historic Methodist emphases explored in this working paper will be most helpful for Methodist evangelism in the last eighteen years of this decade and into the 21st Century?

#### PROPOSALS:

1. Let us take seriously the centrality of John Wesley's question: "Have you received the Holy Ghost; the Spirit which is of God, and is bestowed by him on all believers, 'That we may know the things which are freely given to us of God?' And let us also heed his warning: 'Beware you never account yourself a Christian, no, not in lowest degree, till God 'hath sent forth the Spirit of Christ into your heart;' and that 'Spirit bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God.'" (Works, VIII, p.p. 182-183)
2. Let us continue by taking an equally serious look at Albert Outler's observation that "the next Great Awakening will surely be pneumatological—an unprogrammed outpouring of the Holy Spirit. One of the clearest signs of the times is the hunger of technological man for the mystical and mysterious, for new explorations into the personal, interpersonal and arcane." (Evangelism In The Wesleyan Spirit, p. 77)
3. There is a great need to reshape a new (yet perhaps very old) theology of the "spiritual." What is spiritual reality? Methodists need to be ready to address that question for the New Believers which will be seeking clarification in the years ahead. Let us expect and encourage all Methodist pastors to preach and teach on the meaning of life as seen in our central Methodist doctrines as applied to 20th and 21st Century problems.

5. Create "membership training" and confirmation resources and programs which provide adequate opportunity for personal and corporate "experience" as well as instruction.

6. Prepare ourselves to more adequately train new converts in personal witnessing and participation in the great challenge and joy of relational evangelism. We need to help our Methodist people be able to express "why" they believe as well as "what" they believe. Let us infuse into the already existing lay witness movement a solid Methodist theological base.

7. Let us encourage in every local congregation opportunities for faith sharing, witnessing to one another our own experiences of God's grace, power, and mystery. This may mean a return to some sort of modified "class" or "band" dynamic in Methodist churches. Or, it may take the form of love feasts, or be part of the regular Sunday morning worship experience. Without learning more to tell the story of God's grace to each other, it is highly unlikely that we will be able to tell it very wisely to others.

8. Continually let us seek, publish, and encourage the use of new "Methodist" hymns since music is an extremely valuable ally of Christian experience.

9. Encourage more widely among our members the habit of keeping a journal in order that they might reflect on their own Christian experience and grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

10. Let us explore Roy Sano's proposal that "redemption" as well as "reconciliation" belongs up front in a contemporary Methodist theology. His witness is that the experience of God's powerful and supportive grace is as likely through participation in the issues of justice and peace as through participation in traditional evangelical appeals to personal reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. If so, we need to hear the witness and share it more widely.

11. Recognizing that religious experience even within the Methodist tradition has great variety let us openly accept such variety and constantly measure the validity of it all with regard to the fruit it bears in the Holy Spirit.

12. Let us in keeping with the affirmation above, encourage, not discourage, wide variety of United Methodist congregations able to meet the needs of an ever increasingly diverse population still looking for a basic theological framework which Methodism may well offer better than any other contemporary and historic expression of the Christian faith.

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