

[This is a working paper not for distribution or quotation without the author's permission]

Elements of Wesleyan Evangelism  
by Scott J. Jones  
Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

There is great potential in asking what contribution the fields of Wesley Studies and Evangelism can make to each other. On the one hand, Wesley Studies can benefit from a critical examination of Wesley's thought and practice in evangelism. It would fit under the category of "specialized studies" called for in Richard Heitzenrater's "John Wesley and the Historian's Task".<sup>1</sup> As such, an investigation into Wesley's evangelism would take into account both the eighteenth-century context in which he worked and the theological and practical resources upon which he drew. It would need to account for the relationships between the Wesleyan movement and other manifestations of the evangelical revival. It would need to evaluate the state of Christianity in England during that century and the extent to which the revival is appropriately termed "evangelism."

On the other hand, Evangelism may find in the work of John Wesley an orientation that would provide a new perspective on many of the problems it faces today. Wesley's theology and practice can offer significant help on at least two issues in the field today. First, there is a crisis in our understanding of the foundation, aim and nature of evangelism. The crisis in mission described in David J. Bosch's *Transforming Mission*<sup>2</sup> applies equally to evangelism. Indeed, Bosch argues that evangelism is an essential dimension of mission.<sup>3</sup> While I am inclined to agree with him on this point, the relationships between mission, evangelism and church growth are confused both in the church and in the academic literature. In these matters, Wesleyan theology may provide a perspective which resolves many points of confusion.

---

<sup>1</sup> In *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism*, Kingswood Books (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 211-213.

<sup>2</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 1-11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

Second, many contemporary books call for a closer relationship between evangelism and the social gospel. Liberation theologians in particular have argued for the essential unity of these two aspects of the church's ministry.<sup>4</sup> However, the theological basis for such a unity is not clearly explained. William J. Abraham's *Logic of Evangelism*<sup>5</sup> gives the best such account to date, but a deeper study of Wesleyan theology and practice can offer significant help here.

Thus, the questions of what was Wesley's understanding and practice of evangelism and how it is best applied today appear to be very fruitful lines of inquiry. Two methodological problems need to be borne in mind, however. The first is a familiar one to Wesley scholars. The malleability of Wesley's thought has three causes. First, it stems from the way in which Wesley himself approached the theological task. He sought to occupy the "extreme center."<sup>6</sup> Many of his sermons make the point that one should avoid the extreme positions on a given issue.<sup>7</sup> Wesley's care with regard to definitions and the different senses in which key terms are used also allowed him to give answers that brought two different views into a harmonious whole. His understanding of faith and works in the way of salvation is one such example of a carefully crafted argument showing the respective necessities for each.<sup>8</sup> Because of the centrist nature of his theology, Wesley is open to misunderstanding and misinterpretation on all sides. Hence, different scholars

---

<sup>4</sup> See Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Evangelization from a Liberation Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991) for a helpful summary.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> I have borrowed this phrase from *The Economist*, a British news magazine. It once described its own position as "the extreme center, conservative in some areas, progressive in other areas, and totally opposed to the dead center, which is occupied by most government bureaucrats." Wesley's opposition to the "dead center" of nominal Christianity renders this an apt description of his position also.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, "The Witness of the Spirit, II" §I.2, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Bicentennial Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984-), 1:285, where Wesley perceives dangers on both sides. While others might regard his position as extreme, he viewed his doctrine as situated in the middle. All further references to this edition of Wesley's writings will be given as "*Works*" with volume and page number. Citations from *The Works of John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols., (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; rpt., Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, [1958-59]) will be given as "Jackson" with volume and page number.

<sup>8</sup> "The Scripture Way of Salvation," §§III.2, 13, *Works*, 2:162-63, 167.

have emphasized his affinities with Puritans, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and many conflicting sub-traditions within each of these groups.

Secondly, malleability also arises from the occasional nature of Wesley's writings. As has often been remarked, he did not set out to write a systematic theology. Even the idea of such a thing would have been anathema to him. Rather, he was engaged in the task of preaching the Gospel, teaching the people, and guiding the revival of genuine Christianity with which God had intrusted him. Thus, his formulations sometimes lack precision which later scholars seek from his writings. In the heat of controversy he sometimes says contradictory things because he was writing in haste or wishing to emphasize a point very strongly.

The antidote to malleability, insofar as there is one in Wesley Studies, is to discipline oneself to the examination of the whole of Wesley's thought and practice. Far too often enthusiastic Wesleyans have sought to adapt the legacy of the founder of Methodism for their own purposes without careful thought about what Wesley as a whole person throughout all of his life was actually saying and doing. Hence Richard Heitzenrater's call for diachronic studies urges one to look at the development of Wesley's thought.<sup>9</sup> Other studies have sought to consider the sometimes conflicting and confusing ways in which the material evidence is presented. Wesley is not a simple figure from whom one proof text can settle the question of what he has to offer on a particular subject.

The second methodological caution is the issue of anachronism. While it is perhaps the key purpose of historical theology to find portions of the past that are usable in the church's witness today, the translation from that period to the present must be carefully made. In typically Wesleyan fashion, I see dangers to both sides. There is the danger of forgetting the past and being ignorant of the forces and ideas which have shaped the present. In this fashion people also neglect the resources which the past may offer them. On the other hand, an uncritical appropriation of the past presumes there are no differences between the eighteenth century and today. In the field of

---

<sup>9</sup> Heitzenrater, 213.

evangelism, there is sometimes a yearning for the good old days, which were rarely as good as we imagine and old only in comparison with a truncated view of the recent past. There are some, though, who think that simply repeating Wesley's eighteenth-century words and methods will now work the magic that he is presumed to have worked back then. It is amazing that pastors ever read verbatim one of Wesley's sermons to a congregation on Sunday morning and then wonder why it was not well received. A critical approach to history teaches us that Wesley's path was neither as great as later triumphalists made it appear nor as irrelevant as many contemporary thinkers now believe. As one of my African-American friends put it when someone enthusiastically urged "getting back to the eighteenth century," "The 1700's were not the golden age for my people." We must be fully aware that the world has changed and Wesley's methods and thoughts must be adapted.

The goal of a balanced and critical appropriation of the past is to understand Wesley in his own times and then use what he can teach us for the present. In a variety of ways, Wesley's work has been a powerful resource for many persons engaged in the task of Christian ministry. At the Eighth Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies in 1986, two papers were read developing the methods of Wesley's class meetings for contemporary evangelism and spiritual formation. Interestingly enough, though, the two represented very different situations. Rui Josgrilberg of the Faculdade de Teologia from San Paolo, Brazil talked about base communities and the task of liberation in his culture, citing Wesley's revival and the class meetings as instructive models for his work. Isaac Lim, pastor of Wesley Methodist Church in Singapore, talked about his large congregation and the cell groups which initiated new persons into the faith. The different cell groups represented a variety of expressions of the Christian faith, some being charismatic and others being more traditional. The pastor said this helped express the diversity of the faith by using Wesley's model. David Lowes Watson's work in the area of Covenant Discipleship Groups and the revival of class leaders in United Methodism in the United States offer two other ways in which class meetings are being reappropriated today. Clearly one source was being used in four different ways in three different contexts.



### Was Wesley an Evangelist?

To some, the question of whether Wesley was an evangelist appears to be so obvious as hardly worth asking. One history of evangelism gives a section to “The Methodist Evangelists,” discussing George Whitefield, John Wesley and the Countess of Huntingdon.<sup>10</sup> Albert Outler’s lectures published as *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* begin with a description of “Wesley the Evangelist.”<sup>11</sup> Other significant works in the field seek to draw on Wesley as a resource in the field.<sup>12</sup> On the surface, Wesley’s role as an eighteenth-century evangelist seems clear.

However, several warning signs suggest that the picture may not be so clear. First, both George Hunter and James Logan note that Wesley never uses the Great Commission as a biblical basis for his activity.<sup>13</sup> Further, a search of the text of the Jackson edition of Wesley’s *Works* shows that he nowhere uses the term “evangelism.” He uses the words “evangelist,” “evangelist’s” and “evangelists” twenty times. Of these, eleven uses clearly refer to the writers of the four gospels.<sup>14</sup> Three of the uses are quotations of 2 Timothy 4:5.<sup>15</sup> Five of the uses come in

---

<sup>10</sup> Paulus Scharpff, *History of Evangelism*, trans. Helga Bender Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971).

<sup>12</sup> See George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), Darius Salter, *American Evangelism: Its Theology and Practice*, Bridgepoint Book (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), and Abraham.

<sup>13</sup> George Hunter, “The Apostolic Identity of the Church and Wesleyan Christianity,” 161 and James C. Logan, “The Evangelical Imperative: A Wesleyan Perspective,” 21, both in James C. Logan, ed., *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage*, Kingswood Books (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> “The Witness of the Spirit, II” §IV.5 *Works*, 1:294 (twice); Journal, February 27, 1754, Jackson 2:311; “The Law Established Through Faith, I,” *Works*, 2:23; “On Divine Providence” §6, *Works*, 2:537; “On Faith,” §8, *Works*, 4:194; Letter to Conyers Middleton, January 4, 1748/9, Jackson 10: 2, 27 (twice); Letter to Elizabeth Ritchie, August 19, 1784, Jackson 13:64; and “Preface” to *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (twice).

<sup>15</sup> Journal for February 17, 1753, Jackson 2:280; “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, 12,” §III.14, *Works*, 1:686; and “Prophets and Priests” (formerly called “The Ministerial Office”) §18, *Works*, 4:82.

the sermon "Prophets and Priests" and refer to the office of an evangelist as distinct from the office of the priest.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most revealing of all these uses is the one in his letter to "John Smith", written March 25, 1747. In responding to a previous letter from this unknown Anglican divine,<sup>17</sup> he says,

But you know no call I have to preach up and down, to play the part of an itinerant evangelist. Perhaps *you* do not. But I do; I know God 'hath required this at my hands.' To me his blessing my work is an abundant proof, although such a proof as often makes me tremble.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Wesley clearly understands that his ministry is that of an "itinerant evangelist."

In the sermon "Prophets and Priests", Wesley distinguishes between two different offices in the Christian Church. Based on the distinction between priests and prophets in the Old Testament, Wesley argues that the early church had the offices of pastor and evangelist. The evangelist was an assistant to the pastor, and "preached the Word."<sup>19</sup> After the time of Constantine and in the eighteenth century, the two offices were usually combined. But that did not mean that an evangelist was automatically a priest. Thus, he argues that the lay preachers of Methodism should be content with their status and not aspire to sacramental duties. Instead, they are to "do the work of evangelists," by which Wesley means "proclaim to all the world the loving-kindness of God our Saviour."<sup>20</sup>

However, it appears from his closing exhortation in "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, 12" that priests of the Church of England also have, or should have, the office of evangelist. Wesley addresses the last five paragraphs to them, urging them to bear fruit for Christ. If they would ask God for real faith which works by love, each one might then "do the work of an evangelist, and make full proof of thy ministry."<sup>21</sup> If Wesley believes that all priests are by virtue

---

<sup>16</sup> "Prophets and Priests," §§7-8, *Works*, 4:77.

<sup>17</sup> *Works*, 26:214, l. 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Works*, 26:237. The Bicentennial Edition suggests the quotation is a reference to Isaiah 1:12. "Smith" had closed his letter with similar words.

<sup>19</sup> "Prophets and Priests," §7, *Works*, 4:77.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, §18, 4:82.

<sup>21</sup> §III.14, *Works*, 1:686, quoting 2 Timothy 4:5.

of ordination called to be evangelists, this would also account for his acceptance of “Smith’s” characterization of him as “an itinerant evangelist.”

However, some of this lack of clarity about terms like “evangelist” arises because of the very problem of anachronism discussed earlier. It is probably that the word “evangelism” came into common usage during the nineteenth century in conjunction with missionary efforts to foreign lands. It thus referred to the introduction of the gospel to areas where Christians had not witnessed before. It would be anachronistic to look for the term and its cognates to be used in the eighteenth century with meanings that only became common later.

What does Wesley see himself doing? How does he understand the whole undertaking in which he is involved? Question three of the “Large Minutes” is perhaps the most often published description of the Methodist work.

Q. 3. What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?

A. Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever Wesley means by “evangelist,” it involves the tasks of “reforming the nation” and spreading “scriptural holiness.” In “The General Spread of the Gospel” he characterizes this activity as a “revival of religion”, as “pure and undefiled religion,” “experimental knowledge and love of God,” and “inward and outward holiness”. All of these are descriptions of the kind of religion that Wesley believes will spread quietly just as the work of God through the Methodist societies has done.

Wesley is not directly pursuing the growth of the church or increased numbers of converts. Instead, he is pursuing the spread of genuine Christianity, which has the inevitable end result of growth in numbers. While the present state of Christianity in England (let alone Roman Catholic and pagan countries) is dismally poor, this quiet activity of God will eventually achieve the universal Christianity promised in the Scriptures.

---

<sup>22</sup> “Minutes of Several Conversations,” Jackson 8:299.

The idea of “reforming” the nation takes seriously the context in which Wesley was working. England, Ireland, Scotland and the American colonies were nominally Christian countries. They had established churches. People were routinely baptized. To use the phrases of his second Oxford sermon, the people of Great Britain and its colonies were *almost* Christians, but not *altogether* Christians.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, two conclusions are possible in response to the question about Wesley’s self-understanding as an evangelist. First, Wesley does see himself and his lay preachers as evangelists. Indeed, all priests should exercise that office as well. Second, evangelism for Wesley is tied up with the proclamation of the gospel so that scriptural holiness might be spread into the hearts of the people.

Whether we now consider Wesley to be an evangelist depends greatly upon the definition of the term. Two such definitions will provide contrasting perspectives. William J. Abraham defines it as “that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time.”<sup>24</sup> On this definition, Wesley is not an evangelist. He is working in a context where people have been initiated into the reign of God through the sacrament of baptism. Hence, they are being re-initiated. Methodism’s mission is the re-formation of the nation. While Wesley has serious questions about the transforming power of infant baptism, he does not care to speculate on what it is all about.<sup>25</sup> Rather, he states that whatever happened then, his listener was presently a heathen in need of the gospel.

A second definition makes no mention of entering the Christian life for the first time. David Bosch says,

we may, then, summarize evangelism as that dimension and activity of the church’s mission which, by word and deed and in the light of particular conditions and a particular context, offers every person and community, everywhere, a valid opportunity to be directly challenged to a radical reorientation of their lives, a reorientation which involves such things as deliverance from slavery to the world and its powers; embracing Christ as

---

<sup>23</sup> “The Almost Christian,” *Works*, 1:131.

<sup>24</sup> Abraham, 95.

<sup>25</sup> See “The New Birth, §§IV.1-2, *Works*, 2:196-7.

Savior and Lord; becoming a living member of his community, the church; being enlisted into his service of reconciliation, peace and justice on earth; and being committed to God's purpose of placing all things under the rule of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

On this understanding Wesley is an evangelist because he is clearly challenging all persons within his reach to a "radical reorientation of their lives." Bosch, however, is not clear whether this radical reorientation is one that applies to spiritually mature Christians. With his sharp awareness of the way of salvation, Wesley would have distinguished the different activities of convincing and justifying grace from sanctifying grace.

### Elements of a Wesleyan Contribution to Contemporary Evangelism

With this understanding as a base, I want to suggest six contributions that Wesley's understanding of evangelism might make to our contemporary thinking and practice. Generally speaking, the contributions can be summarized in two ways.

First, Wesley understands evangelism within the whole doctrine of salvation. Billy Abraham's definition focuses on evangelism as a ministry to persons entering the Christian life. If we understand living in the reign of God as synonymous with scriptural holiness, then we see the ways in which Abraham is following Wesley's lead. Nevertheless, the important part here is the articulation of the entire way of salvation so that the question of initiation is never divorced from the larger issue of the goal and direction of the Christian life. Wesley's clarity about the way of salvation can be helpful.

Second, Wesley focused the ministry of evangelism toward a communal aspect that prevented rampant individualism. The issues surrounding individual salvation and the Methodist societies, and those surrounding the relationship of the societies to the Church of England are complex. Wesley's practice often contradicted his words; nevertheless it was his intention to always place the proclamation of the gospel to individuals within a communal context. Wherever they went the Methodist preachers were to form societies, establish class meetings, and urge participation in the parish church.

---

<sup>26</sup> Bosch, 420.



### 1. Biblical Understanding of Salvation

Evangelism clearly has something to do with what Wesley called "saving souls".<sup>27</sup>

Theologically, an understanding of evangelism is intimately connected with soteriology.

To borrow a distinction used by David Kelsey,<sup>28</sup> Wesley saw Scripture as both unitary and whole. Its wholeness is constituted by its doctrinal content which he calls "the analogy of faith." The general tenor of the Bible is God's way of salvation for human beings. It has three main points: original sin, justification by faith, and sanctification.<sup>29</sup> Wesley's conception of evangelism starts from this reading of Scripture. It sees the whole Scripture pointing to the wholeness of the Christian life as a process. James Logan has written about the wholeness of Wesley's understanding as an important contribution to the contemporary situation. He writes,

A recovery of the trajectory of wholeness, both of grace and mission, could be a mighty corrective to current social accommodations of the gospel. Wesley's message was no superficial gospel catering to the whims of the moment. It was a whole gospel for persons, church and society.<sup>30</sup>

To say the least, such a reading of Scripture's wholeness must be in dialogue with contemporary interpretations. This is one reason why the Wesleyan tradition described by Tom Langford in *Practical Divinity* is as rich and variegated as it is.<sup>31</sup> The Wesleyan commitment to the authority of Scripture above all other authorities requires an openness to other construals of the biblical text that are more faithful to its general tenor. If evangelism is conceived to be a ministry for those entering the Christian life, then Wesley soteriology can never forget the rest of

---

<sup>27</sup> The eleventh of the twelve rules of a helper is "You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those that want you, but to those that want you most." "Large Minutes," Jackson 8:310.

<sup>28</sup> David Kelsey, *The Use of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 106.

<sup>29</sup> For one of Wesley's most cogent statements of this way of salvation, see "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Works*, 2:153-69.

<sup>30</sup> James C. Logan, "The Evangelical Imperative," 20.

<sup>31</sup> Tom Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).

Some of the implications for evangelism in this perspective are clear. First, it dampens if not removes the sense of imperialism as we approach non-Christians. There is no human being who is devoid of God's grace. We do not take God to some person or some place where God's grace has not already been active. Rather, we are ourselves instruments of God's grace in a process which has parts of which we are ignorant.

Second, it provides the grounding for a deep sense of humility in all our evangelistic activities. In contrast to the "I Found It" campaign which utilized bumper stickers twenty years ago in the United States, we acknowledge that we are all recipients of the grace of God and it is the priority of God's grace which remains always present in our minds. D. T. Niles' famous phrase that "evangelism is one beggar showing another beggar where one has found food" reflects this kind of humility.

### 3. Focus on the Individual in Community

Several forms of evangelism in the North American context have been criticized as "individualistic," neglecting the social and communal aspects of the Christian life. Wesley has also been criticized along the same lines.

It is true that Wesleyan theology focuses on the individual and how she or he can experience the salvation that Scripture promises. Wesley's famous Aldersgate experience, whether it was his conversion or his experience of assurance, has become a model for the individual's experience of salvation apart from any saving community.

Such a reading of Wesley is incomplete and inaccurate. While many may appeal to Aldersgate to justify their own individualistic tendencies, Wesley's practice on this matter is altogether different from the popular stereotype. First, question six of the "Large Minutes"<sup>34</sup> states the clear policy that Methodist preachers should not preach without forming a society. While John Wesley was not the most powerful of the preachers active in the eighteenth-century revival (perhaps George Whitefield could best lay claim to that title), he clearly was a better

---

<sup>34</sup> Jackson, 8:300.

organizer. This meant the formation of Christian communities which became the societies and classes. This provided a genuinely new form of community for the working class. It was one of the first places where they controlled their own destiny, where women were given roles of public leadership, and where those displaced by the beginnings of the industrial revolution could find new relationships. It is no accident that when the British labor unions were started, they used the Methodist class meeting as their organizational pattern. Wesley's practice was to convert individuals within the context of new patterns of Christian community. This is the Wesleyan background which Rui Josgrilberg and Isaac Lim claimed for their practices in Brazil and Singapore, respectively.

Research from a colleague, Tom Albin, is expected to show a pattern of conversion quite different from our nineteenth-century stereotypes. In the Wesleyan revival, the movement from being "awakened" by a conviction of sin to the experience of justification was a matter of years, not days or minutes. Persons were placed in Methodist class meetings from their first awakening, and it was the discipline of the class meeting that helped guide them toward their goal.

With regard to the institutional Church of England, Wesley's purpose was to serve it well by reforming it. He professed all of his life to be a faithful son of the Church of England, and resisted the calls of his people to separate from the Church. However, Frank Baker, in his *John Wesley and the Church of England*, quotes Dr. Joseph Beaumont's assessment of Wesley "like a strong and skilful rower, looked one way, while ever stroke of his oar took him in the opposite direction." Baker suggests that Wesley's deliberate separation from the Church of England "was primarily in the realm of deeds, rather than of thought."<sup>35</sup> Wesley's concern for the well-being of the church thus should not be measured by his actions. In our search for help in contemporary evangelism, we need to listen to what Wesley says, rather than imitate what he does.

#### 4. The Unity of Evangelism and Social Holiness

---

<sup>35</sup> Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1970), 2.

Wesley took several steps to address ethical issues that we would today label as “social issues.” He discussed the evils of slavery, smuggling, political rebellion, selling and consuming spirituous liquors, and the evils of war. His sermon on “The Use of Money” makes clear that individual economic gain should not be at the expense of social harm.<sup>36</sup> Wesley lacked our modern analytical tools for social analysis, but the eighteenth-century seeds of the social gospel are clearly present in his thought. When he says, “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness,” he means is that salvation implies Christian community and the “faith working by love” that includes love of neighbor. However, Wesley would clearly welcome the increased sophistication with which we understand how love of neighbor is best implemented our contemporary societies. The implications for evangelism here would negate all forms of evangelism that do not involve the nurture and discipline of a Christian community that expresses God’s love for the whole nation and God’s demand for justice for all persons. Wesleyan evangelism is always tied to social action, and carries with it concerns for the entire range of moral issues.

The primary contribution Wesley can make here is to carry the discussion to a deeper level than is ordinarily done. Sometimes evangelism appears to talk about social action as a means of opening doors so the “real” ministry of conversion can take place. By locating the entry into the Christian life as inescapably tied in with holiness in both inward and outward, personal and social forms, then there is a theoretical basis for the unity of these two “so long disjointed.”<sup>37</sup>

### 5. Expectation of Growth

Wesley cared deeply about authentic Christianity. He experienced rejection and failure at the hands of the Church of England leadership during the early years of the Revival. In three

---

<sup>36</sup> “The Use of Money” §I. See also Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) and Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, trans. John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> Charles Wesley’s phrase applied to knowledge and vital piety in “Come, Father, Son and Holy Ghost,” st. 5, *Works*, 7:644.

sermons before the University of Oxford, he proclaimed the basic message of genuine Christianity and was then not invited to preach there again. Similar experiences happened at many churches in the City of London. With Wesley, getting the message right came first. At the end of his life, he published his "Thoughts Upon Methodism" and put it this way,

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 the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, one of the main themes of Wesley's life is the struggle against nominal Christianity and the doctrines which underlay it during the eighteenth century. However, once authentic Christianity is preached and practiced, Wesley expects growth in both individuals' relationships to God and in the numbers of persons being saved.

On the first point, he is clear that God desires the salvation of every soul, and that God has provided means of grace by which someone can expect to receive that grace. The instituted means he mentioned were prayer, searching the Scriptures and the Lord's Supper. Other, prudential means of grace include class meetings and other spiritual disciplines not explicitly commanded by Christ. Wesley's expectation is clearly that those who use the means of grace will make progress and eventually find full salvation.

When such cases are multiplied over and over, the result is the spread of "true religion" all over the world. Wesley is well aware that the chief hindrance to the spread of Christianity is the way in which Christians actually live. Further, he is clear that "the mystery of iniquity,"<sup>39</sup> the presence of sin within the Christian community, started even during the time of the apostles. Nevertheless, he is convinced that where genuine Christianity is preached and practiced, lives will be transformed and Christianity will spread to cover the globe. In his sermon, "General Spread of the Gospel", he acknowledges that genuine Christianity was rare in the world at that time. But

---

<sup>38</sup> "Thoughts Upon Methodism", §1, *Works*, 9:527.

<sup>39</sup> See "The Mystery of Iniquity," *Works*, 2:451-70.



against those who deride any notion of a completely Christian world, he notes what God has done through the Methodist revival, already fifty years old. He presumes that God will carry on God's work in the same manner until the promise of Isaiah 11:9 is fulfilled.

Wesley's lifetime of activity--traveling many miles on horseback, preaching constantly, spending his time and his money for the transformation of Great Britain and the American colonies--makes sense when seen in this light of his own self-understanding. He had an optimism of grace, rooted in his view of God's activity and what he had seen the Lord do through Methodism.

One implication for evangelism today is obvious. The expectations that persons bring to the ministry about the results of their work amount to presuppositions that then shape how they do their ministry. Some presume that authentic Christianity will be persecuted and dwindle. Declining numbers of active believers in a particular congregation or denomination are thus signs of progress and faithfulness. Others presume that the work of spreading the gospel has largely been accomplished where they serve, and the task is to maintain its status and deepen the faith and practice of the adherents. Neither of these is Wesleyan.

Rather, a Wesleyan approach to evangelism sees its task as "to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land." It understands the difficulties it faces and does not minimize the problems. It also understands that nominal Christianity is a serious obstacle in the process. However, it is confidence in the gracious activity of God that leads Wesleyan evangelists to work in this manner, confident that God is using them as part of larger purposes. The clear expectation is that where authentic Christianity is preached and practiced, the Christian community will grow in both depth of faith and love and in numbers of believers.

## 6. Practicality

Wesley designs “plain truth for plain people.”<sup>40</sup> He is interested in what actually makes a difference in the lives of ordinary persons. His sermons are addressed “*ad populum*--to the bulk of mankind--to those who . . . are competent judges of those truths which are necessary to present and future happiness.”<sup>41</sup>

Once Wesley’s understanding of the doctrine of salvation was clear, much of his time was spent in finding the best ways of spreading the good news wherever he could. He stumbled onto many innovative methods such as field preaching, the use of lay preachers, the empowerment of women as class leaders and exhorters, and the institution of class meetings because he found that they worked. He would frequently find biblical and traditional arguments to support such practices, but their primary justification is that they were prudentially validated.

Methodologically, this relates to his understanding that the Scripture must be supplemented by reason and experience in some areas. There are places where Scripture does not give sufficiently detailed commandments; while the commandments must be followed, reason and experience must be employed to determine the best way of following the commandments in that circumstance.

Wesley’s legacy of concern for practical Christianity has characterized the people called Methodist in the two centuries following his death. There have been times at which Methodists have appeared to lose their theological bearings out of concern for using “whatever works” without asking questions about its faithfulness to the Scriptures. In other situations, however, Methodists have become bogged down by precisely the sort of “speculative Christianity” which Wesley abhorred.

A Wesleyan approach to evangelism will keep both in tension. There is no doubt, as I mentioned in the first two points above, that the biblical vision of salvation and God’s gracious action determine our vision. But once we understand the vision, a practical concern for what

---

<sup>40</sup> “Preface” to *Sermons on Several Occasions*, §3, *Works*, 1:104.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, §2, 1:103-4.

Scott J. Jones

Elements of Wesleyan Evangelism

-18-

actually will best carry out that mission in our particular circumstances is an important

consideration.

8/3/97