The Monastic Wesley: Asceticism in Wesley's '*Character of a Methodist*'

Introduction

The "Monastic Wesley"? John Wesley was not a monk in the traditional sense. He didn't wear a monastic habit or live in an enclosed monastery or hermitage. The monasteries in England had long been dissolved by the time John Wesley was alive. More commonly associated with being an eighteenth-century evangelical reformer of the Anglican Church, he is better known for open-air preaching and organizing religious societies. Still, one can sense a monastic pulse or rhythm in the long trajectory of Wesley's theological outlook and discipleship practice. Like monks, whose lives are defined by ascetic practice, Wesley and early Methodists, from the Oxford Holy Club days and beyond, were influenced by and practiced an ascetic way of life.[1]

So, while Wesley was not a monk in any traditional sense, there was in his life, work, and thought a monastic/ascetic thread. *The Character of a Methodist* is one of Wesley's works that reflects this ascetic quality. This paper will explore *The Character of a Methodist* through an ascetic lens. Doing so reveals that for Wesley, early Methodism was more than simple piety or religious devotion. Rather it had the characteristics of an

[1] See Ted A. Campbell, "Wesley's Use of the Church Fathers," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 50, No. 2, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1995-1996).; Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).; Kenneth Carveley, "L'Entente Spirituelle: John Wesley and some French Monastic Sources," in *Methodism and Monasticism*, ed. Daniel Reed (United Kingdom: Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History, 2021).; and Linda A. Ryan, "The Kingswood School rule and monastic schooling," in *Methodism and Monasticism*, ed. Daniel Reed (United Kingdom: Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History, 2021).

intentional program of ascetic practice and formation that aimed for the formation of a new person within a more dominant social context. This ascetic quality emerges from John Wesley's *The Character of a Methodist*. This does not diminish Wesley's agenda of scriptural holiness or reappropriating primitive Christianity. Rather, this holiness is central to Methodist ascetic identity.

In its original context, *Character of a Methodist* served, in part, as an answer to critics, and the larger world, as to what was distinct about the early Methodist movement. Over time, John Wesley's *Character of a Methodist* became a devotional text that articulated ideals and aspirations for holy living in a Wesleyan way. First published in 1742, *The Character of a Methodist* was printed in numerous editions across the eighteenth century, the twelfth edition in1793, demonstrating the sustainability and importance of the work.

Still, while acknowledging these impacts of the writing, what if the aim and effect of *Character of a Methodist* was more than inspiration, aspiration, or even apologetics for the Methodist movement? What if, rather, it articulated an intentional way of being for Methodists then and now? This paper argues that *The Character of a Methodist* also had an ascetic quality. By articulating a particular way of life in this work, Wesley did more than respond apologetically to contemporary critics. He constructed a distinct Methodist ascetic identity within the larger 18th century religious and social context and invited people to transformation of heart and life.

This paper explores *The Character of a Methodist* through an ascetical lens. To meet this end, it will define asceticism and use a modern theory of asceticism by Richard

Valantasis to draw out the ascetical dimensions of *Character of a Methodist*. Further, it will discuss how John Wesley fits aptly into an ascetic context and also how to recognize the ascetical impulse within a text like *The Character of a Methodist*. Finally, it will analyze *The Character of a Methodist* through an ascetic lens.

A Definition of Ascetism

The word "asceticism" comes from the Greek, *askesis (ασκεσιο),* meaning training, exercise, or practice.[2] In verbal form, *askeo*, it was used describe athletic training.[3] Although *askesis,* was not a uniquely Christian concept, it was later adopted by Christians, particularly from the monastic tradition, to describe training not for athletics, but for the spiritual life. It referred to intentional practices that led to the formation of a new self.

Further, asceticism, held a prominent place in the late antique Christian world as both a common and important means of expressing religious piety and practice.[4] While there were many ascetics within the diverse religious and philosophical landscape of the late antique Greco-Roman world, asceticism was widespread amongst Christian leaders, theologians and lay persons of that period.[5] While there were many different expressions of ascetic thought and practice even within Christianity, it was associated with spiritual formation and practicing the Christian life.

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[2] G.W.H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 244.
[3] H.G. and Scott Liddell, ed., *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 124.
[4] Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[5] A good source for exploring the diversity of asceticism in the late antique Greco-Roman world is, Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

While ascetic practices have often been viewed simply as acts of renunciation or denial (poverty, chastity, fasting, etc.), or extreme practices that have a harmful impact on the body (extreme forms of fasting, praying in cold water, living on top of a pillar, etc.), more recent scholarship has demonstrated that limiting asceticism to specific practices such as these misses the larger aims of the ascetic. The goal is not simply to engage in extreme practices that challenge the body, nor does asceticism imply a pejorative view of the body in favor of the spiritual.[6] Rather, asceticism has a more positive agenda of developing and maintaining a preferred identity, becoming a new self. While often associated with desert hermits or monks, for Christians even beyond the desert or monastery it is the means of union with God and living a Christ-like life.[7]

Elizabeth Clark describes how theories of asceticism can be categorized into different groups: social scientific, psychoanalytical, performance and economic.[8] Each focuses on a different aspect of ascetic practice, but they are not mutually exclusive. There can be overlap between theories and while each will reveal specific features of a vast landscape, each theory group can inform the others.

In this paper, I will use a performance theory of asceticism by Richard Valantasis to analyze the ascetic impulse in Wesley's *Character of a Methodist*. Performance theories of asceticism explore the practices and actions, as well as the motivations behind them.

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[6] See Margaret R. Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 9-17.

[7] For a more detailed discussion on asceticism beyond the desert tradition see, Brett Opalinski, "Pelagius and Galatians: An Ascetic Approach to Grace and Human Effort" (Dissertation, University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology, 2008)., 42-44.

[8] Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

They also take into consideration the social and religious context of the ascetic practitioner.

The Valantasis theory of asceticism was originally spelled out in the article *Constructions of Power in Asceticism*. Here, Valantasis defines asceticism as:

> Performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relationships, and an alternative symbolic universe.[9]

In this theory, Valantasis shifts the approach from the practices themselves, to the motivations behind the practices: formation of a new identity, new and re-defined social relationships, and a new way of understanding the world. To clarify, a practice is not necessarily ascetic because it is associated with monks or other traditional ascetics, say fasting. Rather, the motivation behind the practice must be the formation of a new self, new relationships, and a new way of engaging the world. This theory enables researchers to analyze asceticism beyond persons and traditions typically associated with ascetic practice (monks and desert hermits). It enables one to see the ascetic impulse in a text like *Character of a Methodist*.

In a later revision to this theory, Valantasis emphasized the resistant nature of an ascetic identity within a dominant social, religious, or political system. He revised his definition of asceticism as follows:

> Asceticism consists of any performance resistant to an externally projected or subjectively experienced dominant social or religious context specifically intended (almost as a cognitive impulse) and purposely performed in order to inaugurate a new and alternative subjectivity…Social relationships must be transformed in order to support the new and alternative subjectivity. The symbolic universe or

[9] Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *JAAR* 63, no. 4 (1995).

> construction of reality must be adapted and changed in order to explain and sustain the resistant subjectivity.[10]

Here the intentionality of asceticism is stressed. The aim is to become a new person as an alternative to more dominant and accepted ways of being. What makes a performance or an action ascetical is not the performance itself, but the intent of the performer to define self in opposition to the dominant social context.[11] Further, the resistant identity must be communicable, articulated to the dominant context.[12]

This is, in part, why *The Character of a Methodist* is apt for analysis as an ascetical text. Wesley states in the opening section, "To the Reader", that he is seeking to clarify the distinguishing marks of Methodists in a context in which they are "everywhere spoken against", to show how Methodists are different from others.[13] These "principles and practices" are the "marks of a true Methodist", Wesley writes.[14]

Turning back to asceticism in general, as one begins this process of becoming a new self within a dominant social environment, there are three distinctive subjectivities of the ascetic: 1. The rejected subjectivity; 2. The not yet realized new subjectivity that the ascetic is aiming for; and 3. The in-between subjectivity that fluctuates between the two.[15] Ascetical formation occurs in the movement between these three subjectivities as one gradually leaves the old self and becomes the new person. In Wesleyan terms, this could be described as growing in holiness, sanctification.

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[10] Richard Valantasis, "A Theory of Asceticism, Revised," in *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugne, OR: Cascade Books, 2008)., 101-02.
[11] Ibid, 106.
[12] Valantasis, "A Theory of Asceticism, Revised." , 107.
[13]John Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist*, (Bristol: 1742)., Preface, "To the Reader".
[14]Ibid, 15.
[15] Valantasis, "A Theory of Asceticism, Revised.", 114.

John Wesley and Asceticism

Although Wesley is not typically viewed in the same light as ascetic writers like the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Macarius, the Cappadocians, or Benedict of Nursia, the ascetic impulse within and behind John Wesley and comes through in writings like *Character of a Methodist*. Still, Wesley was influenced by the Primitive Church and the Christian ascetical tradition. While Wesley was certainly shaped by other traditions, as well, Lutheran Pietists, Moravians, his own Anglican tradition, the ascetic tradition is also an important lens for considering John Wesley's works.

On Monday, April 21, 1777, John Wesley delivered the sermon *On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel, Near the City-Road, London*[16]. In the sermon, he gave an account of the early history of the Methodist movement. He offered a defense of the movement as orthodox and consistent with the ideals of the Primitive Church and the Church of England. In so doing, Wesley listed writers he saw as definitive for these ideals, those who represented the early church in its "purest" ages. His list included Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, and others. In addition to these names, he listed a group of fourth-century teachers and leaders: John Chyrsostom, Basil, Ephraim the Syrian, and Macarius, all Christians associated with the fourth-century ascetic movement. It is no coincidence that these ascetical writers showed up in Wesley's list of primitive

[16] John Wesley, *Works, 3: Sermon 112*.

Christians. Their inclusion reveals that early Methodism had ascetic roots and it calls for exploring Wesley and his writings from the Christian ascetic perspective.

Further, in addition to those fourth century ascetics Wesley named in the above sermon, other devotional writers important to Wesley came from the ascetic tradition. It is well noted that Wesley was shaped by Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ,* William Law's *A Serious Call to the Devout and Holy Life,* and Bishop Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying,* to name only a few. These writers laid a foundation for the Christian life that shaped Wesley's ongoing discipleship. At times he disagreed with and reconsidered aspects of some of these writers, but their ascetic foundation was ingrained.[17] As Paul Chilcote writes in the preface to his annotated version of *The Imitation of Christ:*

> John Wesley, the founder of Methodism-an eighteenth-century movement of spiritual renewal in the Church of England-considered this book to be of such great importance that he produced some 120 editions in four different forms...He carried a copy of his pocket edition...in his saddlebag for half a century, until his death.[18]

These writings, according to Wesley himself, in the *Laying the Foundation* sermon, gave rise to the new-monastic Holy Club, a group of Oxford students who sought to embody the practices and principles of ascetic writings like *The Imitation of Christ*. It was here that the methodical, perhaps monastic, approach to prayer, study, works of compassion, etc. grew into the name that would come to define the movement. The history of John Wesley and the Holy Club at Oxford is well documented and does not need

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[17] For an example of Wesley's disagreement with William Law, see Gerda Joling-van der Sar, "The Controversy Between William Law and John Wesley," *English Studies* 87, No. 4, no. August 2006 (2006). Here Joling-van der Sar argues that while Wesley admired Law's *Christian Perfection* and *A Serious Call,* he had concern with some of Law's later works.

[18] Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ: Selections Annotated and Explained*, ed. Paul Wesley Chicote (Annotation), Skylight Illuminations Series, (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2012)., xi.

a full account here. It is enough to note that the earliest expression of the Methodist movement had the nature of the Christian ascetical tradition. While Wesleyan thought grew and developed beyond the ascetic rigors of the Oxford Holy Club, the commitment to holiness, growing into a Christlike life, and renewal of the image of God remained predominant themes throughout John Wesley's life.

Scholarship has also noted Wesley's interest in Primitive/Early Christianity that carried throughout his life and ministry. Geordan Hammond writes that Wesley never abandoned his notion that the early church was, "a community that embodied the kind of dynamic holiness of heart and life that he believed the Methodists were providentially raised up to reconstitute throughout the 'British Isles'."[19] Howard Snyder has argued that both before and after Wesley's Aldersgate experience, he read and was shaped by Marcarius' homilies leading to notable similarities between Wesley and Macarius on Christian perfection and holiness.[20] Ted A. Campbell has also noted the affinity and similarities between John Wesley and early ascetic Christianity.[21] These are only a few examples of scholarship exploring the connections between Wesley and the Primitive Church and the early Christian ascetic movement.

These reasons make a strong case for exploring the ascetic impulse in Wesley's writings in general and *Character of a Methodist* in particular. One final point on this matter. Wesley, himself, invites us to read *The Character of a Methodist* through an ascetic

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[19] Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity*., 5.
[20] Howard A. Snyder, "John Wesley and Macarius the Egpytian," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 45, No. 2 (1990).
[21] See Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991)., and Campbell, "Wesley's Use of the Church Fathers."

lens. In a March 1767 letter responding to critic, Dr. William Dodd, Wesley states that when he set out to write *Character to Methodist,* Clement of Alexandria, the early Christian teacher and ascetic, was the model for his work. Wesley wrote:

> Five or six and thirty years ago I much admired the character of a perfect Christian drawn by Clemens Alexandrinus. Five or six and twenty years ago, a thought came into my mind of drawing such a character myself, only in a more scriptural manner and mostly in the very words of Scripture. This I entitled the 'Character of a Methodist'...[22]

Therefore, as *Character of a Methodist* was influenced by the early Christian ascetic tradition and that, as Wesley claims here, the purpose is articulating a distinguishable Methodist identity, it is apt to explore this text through an ascetic lens.

Reading Asceticism in a Text

Written texts are an important part of Christian ascetical spirituality. Some of the noted examples are the *Sayings of Desert Fathers and Mothers, The Rule of Benedict,* the hymns of Ephraim the Syrian, or the homilies associated with Macarius. As noted earlier, neither Wesley nor his writings are typically viewed in the company of such ascetic works. How is it, then, that Wesley's *Character of a Methodist* should be read through an ascetic lens?

Richard Valantasis, in his work exploring whether the *Gospel of Thomas* is an ascetical text, is helpful in addressing this question.[23] Valantasis notes that the Gospel of

[22] John Wesley Journal, *Works, 22: March 5, 1767*.
[23] Richard Valantasis, "Is the *Gospel of Thomas* Ascetical?," in *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

Thomas, too, has not been traditionally read as an ascetical text. Some scholars noted its lack of certain acts of renunciation (sex, marriage, etc.) traditionally associated with the Christian ascetical tradition.[24] This could help explain why *The Character of a Methodist* has not been considered as an ascetic treatise. It too lacks such specific acts of renunciation.

These conclusions, though, reflect a narrow definition of asceticism, limiting it to specific practices and acts of renunciation or abstinence. To do so misses the deeper ascetical impulse and quality. Further, while these actions may indeed be ascetical, they by no means negate an ascetical quality in works not centered on acts of renunciation. As Margaret Miles argues, drawing on Clement of Alexandria, even when an ascetical program contains certain acts of renunciation, renunciation is not the point. Rather, it is a form of training to "engage one's whole life in the love of God." The greater purpose, then, of renunciation is to integrate the body with the soul's greater aims.[25] A more positive understanding of asceticism focuses on identity formation as the aim, as opposed to the practices.[26] Thus, the presence of traditional acts of abstinence or renunciation in a text cannot be the criteria for determining whether a text is ascetical.

The strongest evidence, according to Valantasis, for determining the ascetical nature of a text is in the presence or absence of an agenda to "reformulate or refashion the self".[27] This includes an articulation of the two selves, the one that is being rejected and

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[24] Ibid, 185, 187.
[25] Margaret R. Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Ascetism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981)., 44-45.
[26] Valantasis, "Is the *Gospel of Thomas* Ascetical?.", 191.
[27] Ibid.

the one that is being sought.[28] Thus, what one will be looking for in Wesley's treatise is the articulation of a new, ideal self, as well as practices and attitudes to develop and sustain that identity, in order to see and better understand its ascetic orientation.

At the heart of an ascetic agenda, though, are the practices or performances called for in the text that develop the new self. In referring to the Gospel of Thomas, Valantasis writes:

> The ascetical theology of the Gospel of Thomas sets out a clear and practical program for the development of a new identity. That new identity demands a realignment of social relationships and a new understanding of the nature of the world and life lived in it. This constitutes a performative or practical theology that guides the seeker through practices that carefully articulate an alternative way of living in the world. [29]

The ascetical text is more than historical or apologetic. It spells out a program of identity formation at the core of spiritual practice. The ascetical text becomes for readers a program of spiritual formation that differentiates identity from other more accepted identities in the social, religious, or political context. As Valantasis notes with the *Gospel of Thomas,* it forces the seeker to decide between the old and new identities.[30]

Character of a Methodist

With these criteria for an ascetical text in mind, we turn now to Wesley's *Character of a Methodist*. The questions I will be asking center around how identity was a theme of

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[28] In examining the *Gospel of Thomas,* Valantasis notes that the dynamic struggle between the competing identities reveals the ascetical orientation of the text, more than the presence or absence of acts of renunciation. This is why the Gospel is asectical, even though it doesn't articulate traditional ascetic practices of renunciation. Valantasis, "Is the *Gospel of Thomas* Ascetical?.", 193.
[29] Valantasis, "Is the *Gospel of Thomas* Ascetical?.", 201.
[30] Ibid, 194.

the treatise. Is there a rejected, or dominant, identity present? What about the articulation of a new identity that looks different from that rejected identity? What practices emerge that develop and sustain the new identity? How were social relationships and worldview reconsidered through *Character of a Methodist?* In addressing these questions, an ascetical impulse raises to the surface of *Character of a Methodist*.[31]

To begin, from the start of Wesley's treatise, he was concerned about issues of identity. In the first sentences he raised the anticipatory question of the treatise,

> What are the Principles and the Practice of those, who are commonly called by that Name (Methodist); and what the Distinguishing Marks of this Sect, which is everywhere spoken against.[32]

In this address to the reader, it made clear that Wesley set out to address concerns opponents raised about the movement he was leading. This text then will have multiple contemporary audiences: those opposed to the movement, those within the movement seeking ways to respond, and people in the larger society who wondered how to evaluate this movement. Even as part of the original intent was to answer critics, the many editions throughout Wesley's life, beyond the original context, implied the text continued to be used as a way of articulating a formative Methodist identity.

Within the text itself there was evidence of an audience beyond just critics. In the latter part of the treatise, Wesley stated that these "Principles and Practices of our Sect;

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[31] In reading *Character of a Methodist* through an ascetic lens, using the Valantasis theory, does not make larger claims on the ascetic nature of Christian practice, in general. A good question could be whether a practice remains ascetical if it becomes an accepted or commonly held practice, or if the identity sought after becomes the accepted identity. Questions such as these are beyond the scope of this work. In this case, we are simply looking back at the context of *Character of a Methodist* and this Methodist identity is not the readily accepted identity, meaning Wesley needed to articulate and explain how a Methodist differed from other identities at the time.

[32] *The Character of a Methodist (1742), Works*, 9:32.

these are the marks of a true Methodist."[33] This implied there were "true" and "false" Methodists. Persons claimed the name "Methodist" or an understanding of "Methodist", but did not match the practices and characteristics expressed by Wesley. Thus, one outside the movement, even a critic, could, after reading Wesley's text, could recognize authentic Methodist identity. This also had the effect of articulating the aspired to Methodist identity to those within the movement. What did it look like for one to be a "true Methodist"? Wesley answered this question in *The Character of a Methodist*.

The Rejected Identity

To better see the ascetic impulse in *Character of a Methodist*, we will explore both the new identity expressed, as well as the identity being rejected. In addition, we will look at the way this treatise re-defines social relationships and worldview. In so doing, I will use the order that Wesley employs in the treatise itself and begin with the negative, the rejected identity.

Early in the text, Wesley explained what a Methodist was not. A Methodist was not distinguished by holding certain opinions, using particular words or phrases distinct from common forms, practicing actions or customs of an "indifferent nature", nor by becoming fixated on a particular part of religion that narrowed faith to that singular point.

Looking closer at each, Wesley began with "opinions". For Methodist identity was more than rigidly embracing one set of ideas/opinions and using those to judge others. To define a Methodist as that, Wesley claims, is, "grossly ignorant of the whole affair; he

[33] *Works*, 9:41.

mistakes the Truth totally." [34] It is not that Methodists had no guiding parameters for belief. What grounded Methodists were these basic claims: scripture was the inspiration of God and the only and sufficient rule of faith and practice, and that Christ was the "Eternal, Supreme God", the very image of the invisible God. These made up the "root" of Christianity. Different shoots, ideas, perspectives, and approaches could emerge from this foundation.[35] A Methodist, though, is not one who quibbled about these differences or used them as weapons for judgment.

Next, Wesley moved to "words and phrases". A Methodist will not be identified by a unique vocabulary. He was unimpressed with religious traditions that adopted language and phrasing that excluded common persons. Wesley wrote, "We never therefore willingly or designedly deviate from the most usual way of speaking..."[36] The only exception was using specific words/phrases from scripture.

Next, Wesley addressed actions and practices of an "indifferent nature". He wrote, "Our religion does not lie in doing what God has not enjoin'd, or abstaining from what he hath not forbidden."[37] The Methodist identity would not be marked by a particular type of clothing, particular diets, nor postures of the body. Any action not specifically determined by the "Word of God" was an indifferent action and would not become a mark of Methodist identity.

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[34] *Works*, 9:33.
[35] *Works*, 9:34.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

For the final negative, Wesley stated that a Methodist should not be distinguished for "laying the whole stress of religion on any single part of it."[38] Too many people, Wesley argued, see religion simply as doing good, doing no harm, or attending to religious ordinances. The problem was that one can do all these things and, in the end, miss the point of religion. Salvation, Wesley stated, was simply, "*holiness of heart and life*"[39] He used the example of a man who saw himself as honest only because he didn't steal. Simply avoiding these actions did not necessarily lead to holiness of heart and life. There was something more to a Methodist that just doing the right things. It was total transformation of heart and life, a new identity.

The rejected identity, then, became clear. It was marked by defining religion according to narrow ideas that go beyond the root of Christianity (the scriptures as the only and sufficient rule of faith and practice, and the belief that Christ embodied and reflected God). The rejected identity was also characterized by exclusion of persons through religious vocabulary that made sense only to insiders, fixing non-essential practices on others, and reducing religion to the performance of certain actions or practices, to the exclusion of identity transformation. In stating what a "Methodist" was not, Wesley, articulated a rejected identity and its practices.

The New Identity

[38] *Works*, 9:35.
[39] Ibid.

After Wesley spoke to the negatives, the rejected identity, he began to construct a positive Methodist identity. This became the new subjectivity or identity distinguished from other ways of being. It was the identity that true Methodists would aspire towards. Like the rejected identity described above, these positive descriptions of Methodist identity were defined and supported by certain practices and postures.

First, Wesley gave a concise answer to the basic question, "Who is a Methodist". He answered, "A Methodist is one, who has the Love of God shed abroad in his Heart, by the Holy Ghost given unto him."[40] There is much to this sentence. A Methodist was marked by God's love abiding in the heart, not one's own self-generated love. This love was provided by the Holy Spirit. It was not something to attain or achieve. The Methodist ascetic identity, then will be more than constant striving for success and achievement. It was more than performance of religious ritual, rites, and activities. Rather, it required an openness to receive the love of God provided by the Spirit.

Recognizing the primacy of God's initiative, then, was critical for Methodist identity. The practices that flowed from this would be loving God with all one's heart, mind, soul and strength. God would be the "joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul."[41] This is where ordering was important. A Methodist did not achieve this on their own. The only way love, joy, and desire were possible, was because the Methodist recognized and made space to be filled with the Holy Spirit and the Love of God. The practice for Methodist identity was to

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

understand that one's owns efforts towards love flowed from a love already poured into the heart.

As a result of this love, the Methodist experienced happiness in God. This was more than simply practicing "happiness", though. Wesley wrote, "Perfect Love having now cast out fear, he rejoices evermore."[42] Again, the ordering was important a Methodist's happiness did not come from simply willing it or thinking happy thoughts. No, it was possible only because God's love had been poured into the heart, removing such things as fear.

Following divine love poured into the Methodist's heart, the ascetic Methodist would practice rejoicing in God, reflect on the state one was in prior to experiencing God's love (remembering the rejected identity), and recognize that since God has poured the Spirit of Jesus into one's heart, she/he was now a "Child of God".[43] This is the new identity of a Methodist, a child of God, not by one's own efforts, but by the initiating work of God.

In consideration of all of this, the Methodist was also one who had great hope for the future, that Gods' glory would be revealed.[44] A Methodist, in trusting the work of God in heart and life, would trust the fullness of God's work and glory. Wesley wrote, "mercy hath begotten me again to a living hope."[45] A Methodist, then, would be distinguished by a happiness that existed only because of God's initiating work. As the love of God took hold, the practices of releasing fear, rejoicing in God's work, remembering one's

[42] Ibid.
[43] *Works*, 9:36.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

previous/rejected identity, and hoping for God's future now became markers of Methodist identity.

The next mark of Methodist identity for Wesley was gratitude. A Methodist practiced gratitude in all things, trusted in the hope that God's love was present and poured into the heart. God was working in the present and the future would bring forth God's glory, as discussed in the previous section. Therefore, the Methodist was one who practiced gratitude at all times and in all experiences of life.

This mark of Methodist identity, gratitude in all circumstances, raises theological questions, though. Wesley stated that a Methodist would know that, "this (whatsoever it is) is the Will of God in Christ Jesus concerning him."[46] Does he mean that whatever happened was willed by God? What about social injustice? What about the cruel actions of people exercising free will? What about issues of health or natural disaster? Did Wesley not imply that God willed or brought forth all of these things?

Wesley did not address these questions directly, but rather offered a way of approaching the fragility and vulnerabilities of life centered in God. He wrote that the Methodist, "receives all, saying Good is the will of the Lord…"[47] Further, Wesley wrote:

> Whether in ease or pain, whether in sickness or health, whether in life or death, he giveth thanks from the ground of the heart to Him who order is for good: Knowing that as 'every good gift cometh from above', so none but good can come from the 'Father of lights'…[48]

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

Rather than being consumed with the unanswerable questions about theodicy, injustice, or randomness, Wesley claimed that the Methodist trusted in the goodness of God and lived anticipating that goodness to be present in all the fragility and cruelty of life. A Methodist lived out of the posture that nothing but good could come from God.[49] This is what made gratitude possible, even in the face of life's struggles. Thus, a Methodist "hath learned, in whatever state he is, therewith to be content." In all things, the Methodist, "rests on Him (God)".[50]

Wesley was articulating positive dimensions of Methodist identity and practice. At is core, Methodist identity was defined by the love of God being been poured into the heart, making possible postures and practices such as love, happiness, and gratitude. Some of the other marks of Methodist identity Wesley identified include *praying without ceasing*, which was not always being on one's knees or in a house of prayer, but rather always lifting the heart up to God[51], living in a contemplative posture by "*everywhere 'seeing Him that is invisible'"*[52]; living with a heart purified of revenge, malice, "unkind temper or malign affection", pride, and haughtiness", which led to practices like forgiveness and rejecting lusts of the eye and body[53]; living with one design of life, to do not one's own will, but the will of God[54]; and other practices.

[49] This need not imply that Wesley thought social injustice or cruelty should exist unquestioned. Wesley's own opposition to slavery, concern for prisoners, and passion for the poor, demonstrate the difference in looking for the goodness of God present in all situations and assuming all things that exist are good.
[50] *Character of a Methodist, Works,* 9:37.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] *Works,* 9:38.
[54] Ibid.

As with the previous marks of Methodist identity, all of these resulted from God's initial work in the heart. Wesley wrote that for a Methodist, "his obedience is in proportion to his love, the source from whence it flows".[55] Wesley's ascetic program of identity formation was not a matter of the individual transforming self by their own works and efforts. Rather, it was living in such a way for the love of God to take hold in the heart and then living out of that love. The practices, in essence became the way one lived from a place of that grace. The ascetic work of a Methodist was to "continually" present soul and body to God, to live for the glory of God, and to employ all one's gifts and talents for the sake of that love that existed in the heart.[56]

One final practice of the new identity was discernment. In *The Character of a Methodist,* Wesley didn't articulate how to employ the different postures and practices of Methodist identity in specific instances of life. It was up to the individual to discern what the love of God, that abided in her/his heart, required in that moment. For example, Wesley wrote, "Whatever God has forbidden, he avoids; whatever God has enjoyn'd he doth…"[57] The Methodist had to engage in the practice of discernment regarding what God had forbidden or called for in life's complexities and questions. The same was true for other identity markers. What would it mean to practice happiness, gratitude, or to pray without ceasing in one's own circumstances?

[55] *Works,* 9:39.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

There is more that could be said of each of these postures and practices of Methodist identity.[58] For now, it suffices to note that in *The Character of a Methodist,* Wesley took care to articulate both a rejected and an aspired to identity. In this way, the text is ascetical. Wesley was doing more than creating a devotional or apologetic text, he was carefully describing identity formation within the Methodist movement. The next step is to look at how these postures and practices redefined social relationships and world view.

Social relationships

In the ascetic formation articulated in *The Character of a Methodist*, the new identity had an impact on social relationships. It determined how one related to the others in the larger world, and in so doing maintained and supported the new identity being developed. Simply stated, as love of God grew in one's heart and life, it effected the way that person related to the world. The more one practiced love, the more the love of God would abide in the heart, in essence reinforcing the new identity. This love impacts social relationships both in both a universal (all of humanity) and unique way (Christian circles).

Beginning with the universal, Wesley wrote:

> …he who loveth God, loves his brother also. And accordingly he loves his neighbor as himself; he loves every Man as his own soul. His heart is full of love to all mankind, to every child of the Father of the Spirits of all flesh."[59]

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[58] With the postures and practices of both the rejected identity and the new identity, the opposites could also articulate dimensions of Methodist identity. For example, a Methodist will not diminish religion to one's opinions about non-essential things, and the rejected identity is one that sees prayer as a duty to be fulfilled at particular times and places, not a contemplative way of being.

[59] *Character of a Methodist, Works,* 9:37.

This was more than a recitation of Jesus' admonition to love God and neighbor as self. It required a recognition that every person (friend, enemy, those known and unknown, those who earned approval or disapproval) was a "*Child of the Father of the Spirits of all flesh*". As every person originated in God, that love of God shed abroad in the Methodist heart must also extend to every person. As Wesley stated, "*There is no bar to his love."*[60]

This universal perspective had implications for practice. The Methodist was not one to withhold genuine love from one who caused harm, one disapproved of, one deemed evil, one who didn't show gratitude, even people considered "enemies of God".[61] The Methodist did not have the discretion in social relationships to determine who was worthy or unworthy of love. Wesley even stated that if a Methodist couldn't quite do good to a person they disapproved of, they would offer continuous prayer for the person, even if the opponent continued to spurn, reject, or persecute. In essence, social relationships within a Methodist identity could not be transactional. If the love of God truly lived in the heart, then the Methodist must earnestly seek to love as God loves.

Wesley expanded on this way of relating to people. He reiterated that the Methodist was called to do good to all persons. This included doing good to their bodies (feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, etc.), but even more to their souls. Soul care for Wesley meant "awakening those who sleep in death*",* helping a person find "peace with God, provoking this who have peace with God to abound more in love and good works."[62]

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[60] *Works,* 9:37-8.
[61] *Works,* 9:38.
[62] *Works,* 9:41.

Thus, in social relationships the Methodist was willing to "spend and be spent…so that all may come unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." This way of social relationships was to love people in such a way that they awakened to the inner love of God that would grow through the ascetic process of renewal by divine grace. For Wesley, Methodist social relationships, then, were defined by a universal, non-transactional love, that embodied the love of God that was being shed abroad within their own hearts.

There was also a unique aspect to this identity formation in *Character of a Methodist,* as well. It offered a way of understanding relationships within varying circles of Christianity. For Wesley, this new identity was not distinctly Methodist in a denominational sense. Rather, this Methodist identity was tapping into a genuine form of Christianity. Those who assumed this new identity were "Christian, not in name only but in heart and life", being "inwardly and outwardly conformed to the Will of God." This true Methodist identity embodied nothing less than the "Common" Principles of authentic Christianity.[63]

This meant that just because one claimed the name Methodist, Anglican, Moravian, Catholic, etc. did not mean they were authentically Christian. This was reserved for those engaged in the process of ascetic identity formation where the love of God was growing in heart and life. Wesley writes, quoting scripture:

> 'Whosoever doth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother and sister and mother'. And I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that we be in no wise divided among ourselves.[64]

[63] Ibid.
[64] *Works* 9:42.

For Wesley, those who were more than Christians in name only, "real" Christians regardless of denomination, shared the identity that Methodists were called to live into. These brothers, sisters, and mothers formed a community of discipleship.

Still, this did not negate that all social relationships were grounded in a universal, non-transactional love. Even Christians in name only were to be loved in such a way that they awakened to a divine love that already stirred within and around them. Within the circles of Christianity, though, those who were genuine lived into this identity that Wesley articulated in *Character of a Methodist*. The text distinguished between those who simply claim the name of "Christian" and those who were being "renew'd after the image of God, in righteousness and all true holiness."[65]

Worldview

There has always been an aspect of ascetical Christianity that articulates a new way of understanding life and the world. For example, the Desert Fathers and Mothers withdrew to the deserts of Egypt to embody a way of living that was radically different from the larger society. They sought a life fully immersed in the ways of Christ, rather than in the privileges, powers, and customs of late antique Rome.

There was true of Wesley's asceticism, as well. Wesley's appreciation for fourth century ascetic writers was grounded in his recognition that these ascetic circles marked a push back to the alliance, post-Constantine, of Roman Culture and Christianity.[66] As Ted

[65] *Works* 9:41.
[66] Campbell, "Wesley's Use of the Church Fathers.", 61.

Campbell writes, "Wesley saw the spirituality of asceticism, especially earlier Eastern asceticism, as reflecting more faithfully the Gospel challenge to be conformed to the image of Christ…"[67] The asceticism of John Wesley and the new identity that emerged was a challenge to more dominant ways of being in contemporary society.

Wesley wrote:

> By these marks, by these fruits of a living faith, do we labour to distinguish ourselves, from the unbelieving world, from all whose minds or lives are not according to the Gospel of Christ.[68]

In this we see that there was a worldview that Wesley reacted to, a way of being counter to the identity he articulated in this treatise. While in *The Character of a Methodist* itself, Wesley didn't directly describe the context in which he was writing, but he did give clear indication he was promoting an alternate identity against a more dominant and rejected context.

Wesley claimed that the "customs of the world" would in no way hinder the path that was before the seeking Methodist ascetic.[69] This was because the new identity was grounded in a better worldview than the worldview of society, namely that the love of God was present, operative, primary, and history was moving towards the glory of God. As Wesley stated earlier in the treatise, "He rejoiceth also, whenever he looks forward, 'in hope of' 'the glory that shall be revealed'". [70]

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[67] Ibid, 62.
[68] *The Character of a Methodist, Works,* 9:42.
[69] *Works,* 9:40.
[70] *Works,* 9:36.

The worldview of a Methodist was determined by the love of God that is growing within the heart. Wesley wrote that if God's love was shed abroad in the heart, one would put on mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, long suffering, forgiveness and "all possible ground for contention is cut off."[71] If one assumed an identity in which love of God filled the heart, then there was nothing present in the world that could diminish that new identity, so much was a Methodist filled with love of God, even over desire for the world. Wesley wrote:

> ...seeing he 'loves not the world nor' any of the 'things of the world'; being now 'crucified to the world, and the world crucified to him'; being dead to all that is in the world, both to 'the lust of the flesh, lust of the eye, and the pride of life'. For 'all his desire is unto God'... [72]

For one pursuing the new identity that Wesley articulated, the world had changed. The person had in a sense died (been crucified) to an old way of being. Further, because the new identity was based on the initiative and power of God pouring love into the Methodist, the lures of the world were ineffective.

Wesley once more articulated that the "customs of the world" could not prevent the journey of ascetical formation. Thus, he offered a list of negatives, things the ascetic could not do because of the new identity. Some of these included not being drawn to vice, even if it becomes fashionable; not following the dominant majority down paths that are evil; not living a life of greed or overconsumption; not adorning oneself with pretension; not lying (for God or man) or speaking evil of a neighbor; not using idle words. Rather, the Methodist "*...thinks, and speaks, and acts 'adorning the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in all*

[71] *Works, 9:38*.
[72] Ibid.

things'."[73] Note that Wesley did not simply state that the Methodist "should not" do something, as if simply a legal requirement one could follow or disregard. The Love of God was so pervasive in one's heart that it could not be drawn into lesser customs and ways of the dominant context.

Further, these negatives reveal characteristics of the dominant culture and worldview that the Methodist identity was being established in opposition to: chasing after every fashionable thing, overconsumption, seeking wealth as a primary goal, wearing clothes and jewelry to prove one's worth and value, speaking evil, and telling lies for religious purposes (an ends justifies the means mentality). Thus, we see glimpses of the dominant context that Wesley was building, which Methodist identity opposed.

While Wesley didn't directly describe the context in which he was writing *The Character of a Methodist*, some understanding of the worldview he opposed can be drawn from the treatise. It is not necessary that Wesley address the context directly. In his articulation of a Methodist identity, discussed above, he offered evidence of the more dominant worldview that the new identity challenges.

Conclusion:

The Character of a Methodist functioned as an ascetical text in that John Wesley used it to articulate a new Methodist identity in opposition to a more dominant rejected identity. This new identity was a person so filled with the love of God that it flowed through actions and attitudes. It redefined social relationships and worldview. Wesley described

[73] *Works,* 9:40.

practices and postures that develop and sustain the identity. In this work, the ascetic impulse of John Wesley is revealed.

To finish this paper, I would like to offer a few questions related to contemporary Wesleyan scholarship and practice based on Wesley's asceticism:

1. *Reading Wesley through an ascetic lens:* Recognizing the ascetic impulse in *The Character of a Methodist* invites scholars to explore the asceticism in other writings. As the primitive Christianity and the early Christian ascetic movement remained an important foundation for Wesley, even beyond the Oxford Holy Club, asceticism is an important lens for reading Wesley. How does asceticism show up in other writings like the *General Rules,* letters, sermons, etc.?
2. *Methodist Identity?* If early Methodism was about more than religious affiliation, adhering to religious practices for "rules" or appearance sake, more than a reflection of the dominant culture, and more than being Christian in "name only", what then does an ascetic Methodist identity look like today? How do Methodists intentionally order life and practice faith with a goal of identity formation, in which the love of God is shed abroad in the heart, leading to a counter-cultural way of life? In essence, how does Methodist identity look different from the wider cultural worldviews?
3. *Discipleship:* At a time with denominational decline, within the United Methodist Church, and other Wesleyan communities, it invites reimagining a future where Methodism is a religious order, more than an institution. Methodism is a way of identity formation, and Methodists practice the Christian life with the goal of being

formed into a new person (through grace) in the likeness of Christ, restored in the image of God. What would it mean to see church communities less as denominational institutions and more like monasteries/communities striving to become "schools of love" to help people grow into a new identity based on the love of God? What would a modern Wesleyan ascetical community look like?

And so, we return to the Monastic Wesley. Although the first edition of *The Character of a Methodist* comes relatively early in Wesley's ministry, only a few years after his 1738 Aldersgate experience, its numerous editions and reprints across the eighteenth century suggest that it remained a text of importance for Wesley and the early Methodists. Its purpose was more than history, devotion, or apologetics. It functioned as an ascetical treatise designed to lead Methodists towards holiness of heart and life, the assumption of a new identity defined by the love of God being shed abroad in the heart. While the "Monastic" Wesley was not a monk in a traditional sense, perhaps his ascetic impulse was breathed into the Methodist movement then and now.

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