

"Holiness and Happiness Shall Cover the Earth"
Trajectories of Wesley's Theology of Mission Evangelization

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Introduction

What can we learn from John Wesley's views on mission evangelization for the United Methodist Church today? Of course, Wesley lived in vastly different times. His era preceded the great missionary expansion of the Protestant Church in the nineteenth century. His understanding of the world was circumscribed by his times and prejudices. His Methodist Societies did not have a 'Mission Board.' There is no question, however, that Wesley was *on* a mission. Indeed, he was single-minded in his pursuit of it through his long life.

In this paper I intend to look at Wesley's theology of mission through 1) His thought on the spreading of the gospel over all the earth; 2) His central focus of spreading scriptural holiness; and 3) His own concerns about the state of the Church in his day that can serve as lessons for a present-day perspective on global ministry.

Wesley wrote one sermon dealing specifically with the general spread of the gospel. In it he articulated a vision for world mission which will serve as a focal point for this paper: "uninterrupted holiness and happiness shall cover the earth."

Spread of the Gospel "Shall Cover The Earth"

Henry Rack, in his book, Reasonable Enthusiast, says that Wesley's attitude on missions varied. Like the Methodist movement itself, Wesley often responded to enthusiastic initiatives of his workers rather than beginning them himself.¹

Rack's position is borne out by a Wesley journal entry dated in 1784. A proposal to send missionaries to the East Indies was presented to him. He brought the matter before his preachers and together they "unanimously" rejected it on the grounds of not having received a divine call to do so.²

Just two years later, Wesley responded positively to Thomas Coke's proposal to lend support to missionary activity "in the Gaelic-speaking Scottish Highlands and Islands; in the Channel Isles; in the West Indies; and in North America." Coke had also begun to think of India as a mission field.³

Coke's notion of 'mission field,' however, took on a different connotation from what it had for Wesley and his followers. Coke was interested in taking the Gospel to new and unexplored realms, a forerunner of the great Missionary movement of the nineteenth century. As Rack points out, 'mission field' for Wesley included persons living in Christian and non-Christian countries alike. The purpose of Methodism was to bring 'real' Christianity wherever it

was lacking, home or abroad.⁴

In this sense the world was indeed John Wesley's parish,⁵ for no country had been completely Christianized under these terms. The infusion of 'real' Christianity was needed everywhere. Wesley wanted to eradicate "nominal Christianity" wherever it existed.⁶

A letter to Freeborn Garrettson underscored this point as it applies to overseas mission. Wesley expressed his pleasure at the American Methodist's initiative to visit Nova Scotia. "Let none of them rest in being half-Christians," Wesley wrote. He urged Garrettson to acquaint those he gathered there "with the whole Methodist plan and to accustom them . . . to the accurate observance of all our rules." He urged Garrettson to exhort Nova Scotians to go on to perfection. "The more explicitly and strongly you press all believers to aspire after full sanctification, as attainable now by simple faith, the more the whole work of God will prosper," wrote Wesley.⁷

Wesley was also concerned for the social welfare of persons being evangelized on the mission field. Such concern always came as a 'fruit' of holiness. His dual emphasis of holiness and fruits is seen in his correspondence with Garrettson. In a letter dated November 30, 1786, Wesley asked Garrettson: "How do the inhabitants of Shelburn, Halifax, and other parts of the province, go on as to temporal things? Have they trade? Have they sufficiency of food, and the other necessaries of life?" Wesley showed his willingness to financially undergird overseas mission when he indicated in a postscript to this letter that he would send financial assistance for the construction of a building in Nova Scotia.⁸

Wesley's one sermon that explicitly addressed the topic of overseas mission is "The General Spread of the Gospel." In it, Wesley depicted the world as full of ignorance about Christ. He cited Brerewood in saying that only 5 in 30 people in the world were even nominal Christians. Even this calculation might have been a high estimate, said Wesley, since new nations had been discovered since Brerewood made known his findings.⁹

Wesley revealed his 18th century bias in saying that Western Churches have "pre-eminence over [non-Western] . . . they have abundantly more knowledge: they have more scriptural and more rational modes of worship." Yet, and this was the real point he was trying to score, even Westerners were as far from holiness and righteousness and the mind of Christ "as hell is from heaven!" Wesley asked how it was possible to reconcile this sorry state of humankind with the wisdom or goodness of God? He answered his question by affirming confidence in God's desire to respond to the world and "be jealous of his honor." Here Wesley lifted up his vision for the general spread of the gospel: "The loving knowledge of God, producing uniform, uninterrupted holiness and happiness, shall cover the earth; shall fill every soul of man."¹⁰

Wesley asserted that humans have a definite say in their destiny. They have the choice of life or death set before them. "Now in the same manner as God has converted so many to himself without destroying their liberty, he can undoubtedly convert whole nations, or the whole world; and it is as easy to him to convert a world, as one individual soul." Wesley pointed to the humble beginnings of Methodists in Oxford as a case in point. 'Holiness' became the key word for a movement that began to spread to wider and wider circles, from Britain to Ireland to North America. Wesley asserted that God will continue to carry on his work in the

same manner. He envisioned the work spreading out in America and Europe. Wherever it went it would spread "the experimental knowledge and love of God, of inward and outward holiness." First it will spread among countries where there is Protestantism and Roman Catholicism and then to the "merely Popish" and on to the remotest parts of the world.¹¹

For Wesley, the great stumbling block for the spread of the gospel was murmuring among Christians. When this obstacle is removed, Christians will have more authority and their witness will be stronger. When the world sees the holy lives of Christians, it will not be able to resist the gospel.¹²

The problem remained of reaching those nations where the gospel was completely unknown. Wesley trusted that God would be able to send Christians to these lands so that "he will give his Son 'the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession.'"¹³

When this was accomplished, Wesley asserted, "violence shall no more be heard [and] thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise." This work of spreading the gospel-- which had already begun--will continue "unto the day of the Lord Jesus...until he has fulfilled all his promises."¹⁴

Wesley did not spell out how the general spread of the gospel would be carried out. That was left to his heirs in the faith and others who would begin the great missionary expansion of the nineteenth century. He did express hope that God would make sure that it would be accomplished.

Holiness and Happiness

At the conclusion to his treatise on "The Doctrine of Original Sin, Part I," John Wesley made a simple statement with regard to the general plight of wickedness in the world: "Men are unhappy, because they are unholy."¹⁵ No inhabitant of the earth had escaped this unhappy condition. He surveyed manifestations of evil in all parts of the globe, leaving his most acerbic indictment for his homeland where English soldiers were clear examples of "profound ignorance and barefaced, shameless, shocking impiety."¹⁶

Wesley left the reader of his treatise on Original Sin with the desire to pursue holiness. Such implicit invitation characterized much of Wesley's written work. It was the central focus of his thinking.

Wesley understood scriptural holiness to mean "inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God." The term "Methodist," for Wesley, referred to those who pursued this with "holiness of heart and life. In essence, the term 'Methodist' meant 'real' Christian for Wesley."¹⁷

Wesley interchanged various terms to make his point. He talked of "perfection" and "sanctification." In his sermon on the subject, Wesley said that Christian Perfection "is only another term for holiness."¹⁸ The essential task of the church was to spread scriptural holiness among all people.

In order to spread scriptural holiness, Wesley organized Methodist Societies. The distinctive characteristic of a Methodist, according to Wesley, "is one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him.'"¹⁹ For the Methodist, "God is the

joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul...He is therefore happy in God, yea, always happy, as having in him 'a well of water springing up into everlasting life.'"²⁰

Because of this love of God, the Methodist keeps the commandments of God and serves others, striving to do good by "feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison."²¹ Such service unto others, Wesley insisted, followed the primary goal of laboring "to do good to their souls."²²

The primary mission, then, of Methodists, was to save people's souls, to be the harbingers of 'real' Christianity. Service to others came as a consequence of this primary goal.

For Wesley, the attainment of holiness came through Christian discipline. In 1743 he published "The Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies," in which he specified the disciplines to be practiced by Methodists. Leaders of classes were to receive an offering for the poor from the members as well as inquire how their souls were prospering. The single requirement for admission into the societies was "the desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins."²³ This desire would manifest fruits that show evidence of the believer's desire for salvation. Thus, in the first place, believers adhere to the commandments of God and avoid "evil of every kind" such as drunkenness, fighting, usuary, needless self-indulgence among others. Secondly, believers engaged in social ministries to fellow human beings, seeking to do good to all persons.²⁴

Wesley's mission was to spread scriptural holiness over the land. It was to bring "real Christianity into Christendom." As put forth in "The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained," he sought to bring a religion rooted "in the heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits."²⁵ Wesley envisioned real Christians manifesting inward holiness and outward fruits of love.

Wesley's sermon on "Scriptural Christianity" articulated succinctly the relation between holiness and fruits as it relates to mission. The body of the sermon considered three views of Christianity: 1) What happens when Christianity begins to work in the individual; 2) The spread of Christianity from one person to another; and 3) Christianity covering the earth.²⁶

Wesley described the process by which Christianity worked in individuals. Convinced of sin, the individual repents, believes in Jesus, receives the 'Spirit of adoption,' and begins to call Jesus, 'Lord,' (affirming that Christ now lives within). In this way the individual experiences Peace with God, a state where fear no longer resides. His or her soul rejoices in God, and being loved by God, loves others. The process is infused with humility and characterized by not doing harm to others. One is conscious of the need for God's nurturing grace and thirsts to do good.²⁷

Christianity is spread from one to another when the light of Christ shining within shines for others. One yearns to bring others into the fold for Christ, warning others to flee from the wrath to come.²⁸

Christianity covers the earth in the vision of the prophets who saw a Christian world. The Apostle Paul saw the Gentiles included in God's plan. Now all the world is open to God's Good News. The prospect of such an accomplished prophecy envisions the fulfillment of peace, righteousness and mercy over the earth. Cruelty disappears as all live by the Golden Rule. Harmony among people prevails as everything is subdued to the reign of the Lord. Violence is no more.²⁹

Such is the vision of scriptural holiness bringing salvation to all the earth. But Wesley saw obstacles in the path of the realization of this vision.

"Lessons For Today's Global Ministry"

At the conclusion of his sermon entitled "Scriptural Christianity," Wesley asked questions to contemporary hearers. He wanted to contrast the vision of "Christianity which covers the earth" with present reality. His questions stung as they were asked. If we ask ourselves the same questions, would they not also sting? "Where does this [Scriptural] Christianity now exist? Are those in authority 'filled with the Holy Ghost'? Is there in all your actions dignity and love? Is there written on your forehead and on your heart, 'Holiness to the Lord?' Do those who teach youth remind those...that the one rational end of all our studies, is to know, love and serve 'the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent'?" Wesley implored his hearers to seriously reflect on these questions. Is our age so different that these questions are not relevant?³⁰

To the ministers, Wesley asks, "Are we then patterns to the rest...do we know God...do we know Jesus Christ?" Wesley speaks not only to clergy but to anyone who intends to be Christian. So Many, Wesley laments, "are a generation of triflers...How few of you spend, from one week to another, a single hour in private prayer!"³¹

These questions indict as they are raised. Wesley concluded his sermon with an appeal to God to "take us out of the mire" that Christianity, "scriptural Christianity, should be again the religion of this place."³²

The most important lesson we can learn from Wesley is to give priority to 'holiness of heart and life' in our mission endeavors. How far from an emphasis on Scriptural holiness has our mission ministry gone?

There is no question that Wesley was deeply concerned for social ills of the world. In his early Oxford days, he manifested the fruits of holiness through the visitation of the sick, poor, and imprisoned. His last letter, written just six days before he died, implored William Wilberforce to continue the parliamentary fight to abolish slave trade in the British Empire. Throughout his writings he insisted that the fruits of righteousness should follow justification by faith. In his fourth sermon on the "Sermon on the Mount" he asserted that Christianity was a social religion.

The overwhelming evidence from Wesley's writings, however, gives clear priority to the 'spread of scriptural holiness' as central to mission ministry. Wesley was concerned with the spread of 'real' Christianity at home and abroad.

The General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church has articulated its first goal as "Witness to the Gospel for initial decision to follow Jesus Christ." It sees its responsibilities to accomplish as supporting "evangelization among people who have not heard or heeded the Gospel." The goal reflects Wesley's belief that the purpose of Methodism was to bring 'real' Christianity wherever it was lacking, home or abroad. Were we to take Wesley's emphasis seriously, much time, money and energy would be placed in our mission efforts to help bring 'real' Christianity, with a strong focus on 'holiness of heart,' into United Methodism.

Similarly, the focus of overseas mission would be to assist partner churches in the pursuit of holiness. Training and leadership development would be concerned not only with teaching skills that would help produce effective clergy and laity for organizational and administrative purposes, but also with the spiritual life of our leaders, their 'holiness of heart,' so to speak.

What does 'holiness of heart' look like today? Can we make a bridge of understanding from Wesley's day to our own in such a way that the leaders and followers among people called Methodists today become living testimonies to their faith? Wesley wanted to eradicate nominal Christianity. According to one historian (please cite), those who carried Methodist identification cards during the eighteenth century, were facilitated bank credit by virtue of their belonging to a Methodist Society. It meant something special to be identified as a Methodist. Perhaps a lesson we can learn from Wesley would be to take stock of our membership requirements.

Notes

In the following notes, BE refers to the Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press) and Works refers to the third edition the Works of John Wesley edited by Thomas Jackson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1986 printing of the 1872 edition).

1. Henry D. Rack, Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), p. 476.
2. Works, IV, p. 266.
3. Rack, op. cit., p. 476.
4. Ibid.
5. The famous quote, "The World Is My Parish," came in a letter to James Hervey explaining that since Wesley was appointed to a University and thus to no particular parish, he looked upon "all the world as my parish." See A Compend of Wesley's Theology, edited by Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 261.
6. John Wesley, Forty-four Sermons (London: Epworth Press, 1964 printing), p. 419.
7. "Letter to Freeborn Garrettson," in Works, XIII, p. 70.
8. Ibid, p. 72.
9. Works, VI, p. 277.
10. Ibid, p. 279.
11. Ibid, p. 283.
12. Ibid, pp. 284-285.

13. Ibid, p. 286.
14. Ibid, p. 287.
15. Works, IX, p. 235.
16. Ibid, p. 226.
17. "Advice to the People Called Methodists," BE, IX, p. 123.
18. Forty-four Sermons, op. cit., p. 461.
19. BE, IX, P. 35.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid, p. 41.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid, p. 70.
24. Ibid, p. 72.
25. Ibid, p. 229.
26. Works, V., p. 37-52.
27. Ibid, pp. 34-35.
28. Ibid, p. 42.
29. Ibid, pp. 45-47.
30. Ibid, pp. 47-49.
31. Ibid, pp. 50-51.
32. Ibid.