



AGENEROUSLIFE

Explaining generosity in Methodist tradition and theology

As we engage with the challenges of being the Church in the contemporary world we draw inspiration from our Methodist tradition, going back to our roots in the faith and practice of John Wesley. Running through all that Wesley said and did there is a strong and pervasive spirit of generosity.

The generous spirit to which we must remain true if we are to be worthy of the name of Methodist is firmly based in Wesley's theology. The 'Arminian' emphasis in Wesleyan theology takes its name from the teaching of Jacob Arminius who insisted that God has given human beings free will and that Jesus died so that anyone who chose to respond with faith could have salvation. This theological principle was expressed in Wesley's joyous insistence that all can be saved.

The generous love of God was celebrated also in the hymns of Charles Wesley which provided such an important part of the foundations of Methodism through verses such as,

*Your sovereign grace to all extends,
immense and unconfined;
from age to age it never ends;
enfolds all humankind. (StF 436)*

The giving of ourselves in response to this gracious giving of our generous God – reflected in the Covenant Service – is at the heart of Methodist spirituality, which for both John and Charles Wesley was founded firmly on scripture.

For example, Paul writes in Romans 12:1, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." This is notable for what comes before it and for what it leads on to. Paul's 'therefore' follows from his outburst of praise at the

end of Romans 11 in which he asks, "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" And Paul ends verse 1 of Romans 12 by telling us that giving ourselves is, as the NIV translation puts it, "your true and proper worship".

In a verse of another hymn Charles Wesley conveys the appeal that Paul makes in Romans 12:1, as well as our "true and proper worship" in response:

*Our souls and bodies we resign;
with joy we render thee
our all, no longer ours, but thine,
to all eternity. (StF 557)*

If Paul was a theologian he was always a practical theologian, and he goes on in the rest of Romans 12 to spell out what this self-giving worship means in practice. We are to:

- *honour others more highly than ourselves*
- *use our gifts for the benefit of the church as the body of Christ*
- *be patient in affliction*
- *be faithful in prayer*
- *share what we have with needy sisters and brothers in Christ*
- *practise hospitality*
- *bless those who treat us badly*
- *associate with people of lowly status*
- *do good to our enemies.*

In his preaching and teaching John Wesley, like Paul, spelled out what a life lived in response to the generosity of God should look like: Methodist spirituality includes both 'works of piety' (worship, adoration and prayer) and 'works of mercy' (acts of charity and service to others). For Wesley, these two types of spiritual discipline are inseparable in living the Christian life. He expressed this in very practical

advice to Methodists. For example, Wesley's teaching on financial generosity, summed up in his sermon on the use of money, was "Gain all you can, save all you can and give all you can".

Apart from money, the disciplined nature of Methodist spirituality is reflected also in Wesley's sermon on 'redeeming the time' which was based on verse 16 of Ephesians 5 in the King James Version. But this is not merely the practice of discipline for its own sake. The life and teaching of John Wesley demonstrates that time is to be 'redeemed' in order to create the opportunity for a generous way of life which reflects the generous giving of God. Early in Wesley's life, while he was at Oxford, one of the chambermaids came to his door after he had paid for some pictures for his room. It was a cold winter day, and she had nothing to protect her except a thin linen gown. He was going to give her money from his pocket when he found that he had too little left. He was struck by the thought, "Will your Master say, 'Well done, good and faithful steward?' You have decorated your walls with the money which might have sheltered this poor creature from the cold!"

For Wesley, theology was a very practical discipline; insight must be linked to action. He limited his expenses in order to have more money to give to the poor. Early in his ministry, Wesley's income amounted to a little over £3,000 in today's values and his living expenses were roughly equivalent to £2,800, so he had about £200 to give away. When his income doubled, he still managed to live on about £2,800, so he had more than £3,200 in today's money to give to the poor. When his income rose to the equivalent of about £10,000 Wesley still maintained his expenses at his original level and gave the rest away. Methodists are not called to replicate the precise details of his example but to give ourselves in the wholehearted way that Wesley taught.

John Wesley's life provides many illustrations of a theology which is worked out in practice in a spirit of generosity. It is important to add, though, that Methodism began but did not end with Wesley. There are many stories from the subsequent history of Methodism to be told. A century after the Wesleyan Revival, Hugh Price Hughes challenged a movement which he saw was in danger of growing cold in its love

for God and the world. In addressing Methodists of his time Hughes looked to the example of Jesus who sat the crowds down and gave them food to eat: "It will be impossible for us to evangelise the starving poor so long as they continue in a starving condition." Hughes saw such work as an integral part of his mission with a full commitment to the implementation of what he called 'Social Christianity'.

The concern with social justice expresses a vital part element of Wesleyan theology and spirituality: God's grace not only saves from sin; it also sanctifies and equips Christians for service. Holiness in the Wesleyan tradition is manifested in active engagement with the world in mission which seeks to make known the generous love of God in words and in action. The Church is called to be a community bound together in the love which comes from the sanctifying grace of God worked out in the personal and communal lives of God's people.

This is not a description of the Church as it always is, but of the Church as it is called to be: a community not of the self-satisfied saved but of people open to the working of the generous grace of God, and expressing it in a way that transforms the society of which they are part through the work of the generous Spirit of God within, amongst and through them.



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