

## WESLEY ON SOCIAL HOLINESS

The Wesleyan movement was a commitment to a holiness project. For John Wesley holiness of life was, 'the aim of his life, the organising centre of his thought, the spring of all action, his one abiding project'.<sup>i</sup> The purpose of the Methodist movement was to 'spread scriptural holiness throughout the land'.

Wesley once claimed that there was no holiness but social holiness. The original context of the saying was in relation to the necessity for Christian fellowship. Wesley was countering a privatised notion of Christian faith. One cannot go to heaven alone but one needs friends. It is within Christian community that holiness of life is to be realized. Today social holiness needs to be extended beyond ecclesial *koinonia*. It is within the socio-economic and political community that holiness of life is to be realized.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyan celebrations the English congregationalist preacher and theologian, R. W. Dale, reflecting on the Wesleyan heritage, claimed that Methodists had left the doctrine of holiness with Wesley and had not developed its potential as a great social ethic.

The modern tendency towards individualism has too often resulted in Methodists understanding piety from an individualist perspective and reading the Wesleyan emphasis on sanctification or holiness as an individual experience. The evangelistic practice flowing from this has emphasised the conversion of people one by one which then leads to changing society or the world. But does this gospel produce any real transformation at all apart from nominal change or conversion from a few personal bad habits? The conversion or even sanctification of the individual leading to societal change may well be a subverting of the gospel leaving untouched personal and structural realities of power relations, domination, greed and violence.

Towards the end of his life Wesley was increasingly involved in a polemical relationship with the people called Methodists. At the end he even judged his scriptural holiness project a failure.

I am distressed. I know not what to do. I see what I might have done once. I might have said peremptorily and expressly, 'here I am: I and my bible. I will not, I dare not, vary from this book, either in great things or small. I have no power to dispense with one jot or tittle of what is contained therein. I am determined to be a Bible Christian, not almost, but altogether. Who will meet me on this ground? Join me on this or not at all ...' But, alas! The time is now passed; and what I can do now, I cannot tell. (Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity, Works VII: 287-88).

Wesley frequently described holiness as 'renewal of the whole image of God'. Wesley did not understand this in a purely individualistic way. He used eschatology and creation theology in his reflection on holiness. His 'horizon of holiness was the whole world, created and recreated'.<sup>ii</sup> If holiness of life was described in terms of perfect love, then holiness involved social relations including environmental relations. For Wesley the spreading of scriptural holiness entailed 'the transformation of the economic and political order, the establishment of Pentecostal commun(al)ism and the abolition of war'.<sup>iii</sup> Holiness was nothing less than a new creation.

If Wesley concluded at the end of his life that the Methodist holiness project had failed, it was in no small measure due, in his judgment, to the material prosperity of the Methodist people. His great lament was that as Methodists increased in riches so there was a decline in holiness. Wesley's 'gain all you can' and 'save all you can' taken, as they often were in isolation from 'give all you can', subverted the holiness project. Wesley even wondered if;

... true scriptural Christianity has a tendency, in process of time, to undermine and destroy itself? For wherever true Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which in the natural course of things, must beget riches! And riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive of Christianity. (Causes of the inefficacy of Christianity, Works VII: 290).

The failure of the Methodist holiness project was ultimately the failure of the Methodists to stand in radical solidarity with the poor. Yet Wesley had repeatedly called on the Methodists to go to the poor and not simply to wait until the poor came to them. To one 'gentlewoman' member of a society he wrote;

Do not confine your conversation to gentle and elegant people. I should like this as well as you do. But I cannot discover a precedent for it in the life of our Lord, or any of his Apostles. My dear friend, let you and I walk as he walked ... I want you to converse more, abundantly more, with the poorest of the people, who, if they have not taste, have souls, which you may forward on their way to heaven. And they have (many of them) faith, and the love of God in a larger measure than any persons I know. Creep in among these, in spite of dirt, and a hundred disgusting circumstances; and thus put off the gentlewoman. (Letter to 'A Member of the Society, February 7, 1776, Works 12: 301)

Wesley's own regular practice was to go to the poor and often these 'common wretches' found a sense of self worth. Wesley's opposition to the widespread use of liquor was not, as often thought, moralistic, but economic. Half of the wheat produced in Britain was going to the distilling industry which made wheat expensive and in turn made bread expensive and beyond the means of the very poor. Wesley was in reality attacking inflation. Expensive meat was caused by gentlemen farmers finding it more profitable to breed horses for export to France and to meet the increasing demand for horse carriages. Pork, poultry and eggs were so expensive because owners of large estates were earning more from cash crops than from leasing land to small tenant farmers.

In response to these economic problems, Wesley called for Government intervention, increased employment opportunities, a prohibition on the distilling of hard liquor, a reduction in the demand for horses and an additional tax of gentlemen's carriages and a tax of £10 on every horse exported to France. Wesley also advocated the discharge of half the national debt.

Though often criticized for being individualistic, Wesley nevertheless did address some of the structural injustices of his time. The common objection of those who were part of the structural oppression, that the poor were poor only because they were idle, Wesley described as 'wickedly, devilishly false'<sup>iv</sup> The poor were the members of the early societies who were given by Wesley 'a sense of their power over their own destiny ... Wesley organised them and trained them in organisational skills'<sup>v</sup> Wesley's option was for the poor and in the Methodist movement they were empowered as agents of change in society.

Wesley also supported structural change in relation to the evil of slavery. He strongly opposed the denial of natural rights and the pro-slavery argument that slaves were necessary to cultivate crops in hot climates. He addressed ship captains, merchants, and plantation owners and wrote from his deathbed to Wilberforce;

... Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it ... (Letter to William Wilberforce, 24 February, 1791, Letters (Telford) 8:26)

Wesley was dedicated to human rights and his emphasis was based on 'his understanding of human kind grounded in his doctrine of creation'. Primarily God's love 'supplies the context of the first, for it is God's love which overflowed in the creation of humanity'.<sup>vi</sup> Wesley's anthropology, essentially relational and holistic, provided a basis for his commitment to human rights.<sup>vii</sup>

Though Wesley some times seemed opposed to the flowering of democracy (he was still a person of his time), by 1784 he had accepted the American movement for independence and freedom. Even though he was an establishment Anglican he saw the American separation of church and state as an opening for true religion.

The total indifference of the Government whether there be any religion or none leaves room for the propagation of true scriptural religion without the least let or hindrance (Sermon 102).

The above may give the impression that Wesley was more motivated by evangelism than by concerns for political ethics. Yet Wesley did believe that the church had fallen when it entered the Constantinian era in 313 C.E. For Wesley the greatest wound Christianity received;

Was struck in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches, honours, and power, upon the Christians; more especially on the Clergy ... Then, not the golden but the iron age of the church commenced. (Works VI: 261-62).

Whether in economics or politics, Wesley, despite his being an established Anglican, was concerned that the Methodist movement recovered the 'simplicity and purity of the gospel' and avoid the Constantinian wound in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Wesley's holiness project therefore, did extend to the whole creation. Yet it did have weaknesses. Economic prosperity did ultimately undermine the Methodist commitment to scriptural holiness as the economic and political reform of the nation. Wesley also stopped short of a prophetic critique of the state and the monarch. They 'were elevated above criticism' which despite his pragmatic response to American events, did underline Wesley's conservative political views.<sup>viii</sup> Furthermore, Wesley was not radical enough in his commitment to structural change. He was concerned with awakening social conscience but at the same time did have a fear of anarchy and chaos if the social structures were disturbed. At times his leaning was more towards maintaining order rather than towards radical social transformation.

The task for contemporary Methodists is still to develop the great social ethic of scriptural holiness. This will mean going beyond Wesley, not least because we live in a very different world, especially where globalization is dominant. It will mean in practical terms 'getting rid of our preferential option for the affluent'<sup>ix</sup> and developing a socio-political hermeneutic of scripture. This will mean a more contextual reading of the text in our 21<sup>st</sup> century context. It will mean engaging with the principalities and powers of racism, poverty, nationalism, ethnocentrism and the systemic violence which they express with such devastation and destruction of human and environmental community. This also includes the violence of sexism and the personal and structural domination of women.

Scriptural holiness may still be a worthy Methodist project in an ecumenical context but only if we take social, economic and political structures seriously and learn to read scripture and theology from a new socio-political perspective.

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<sup>vi</sup> Wesley, *Works*, VI: 261-62.

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## References

- i Theodore W, Jennings, Jr Good News to the Poor : John Wesley's Evangelical Economics (Abingdon Press, 1990) p 140
- ii Ibid, p152
- iii Ibid, p153
- iv Quoted in Theodore Runyon, The New Creation : John Wesley's Theology Today (Abingdon Press, 1998) p 190
- v Ibid, p191
- vi Ibid, p183
- vii See Randy L Maddox, Responsible Grace : John Wesley's Practical Theology (Kingswood Books, 1994) pp 65-92 for a fuller treatment of Wesley's Anthropology.
- viii Manfred Marquardt, John Wesley's Social Ethics ; Praxis and Principles (Abingdon Press, 1992) p 133
- ix Jennings, op.cit., p192

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January 2002