

The European Methodist Theological Commission

“Scriptural Holiness” projects

### **The Spirituality of ‘Scriptural Holiness’**

A paper prepared by Rev Dr Stephen B Dawes

The word ‘spirituality’ did not feature in John Wesley’s vocabulary and its meaning is prone to vagueness in ours. Marie McCarthy’s definition is probably as good as we can get: ‘Spirituality is a fundamental component of our human beingness, rooted in the natural desires, longings and hungers of the human heart. It is concerned with the deepest desires of the human heart for meaning, purpose and connection, with the deep life lived intentionally in reference to something larger than oneself<sup>1</sup>.’ That understanding of the word, now in universal use inside and outside faith communities, is not found before the late twentieth century, but on the basis of that definition we can identify ‘Scriptural Holiness’ as Wesley’s spirituality<sup>2</sup>. In this paper, therefore, I hope to examine briefly the parameters and key features of the spirituality of ‘Scriptural Holiness’ which was both Wesley’s own spirituality and that which he commended to the early Methodists.

For Wesley ‘Scriptural Holiness’ is a search, a process or, to use a common word from contemporary spirituality, a journey. It is a journey from new birth to spiritual maturity, from sinfulness to perfection, from ‘original sin’ through ‘justification by faith’ to ‘entire sanctification’<sup>3</sup>. The goal of ‘holiness of heart and life’ is an integrated life filled with awareness of the love of God, marked by freedom from the guilt and power of sin, and lived in love towards others – a mature, responsible, fulfilled life<sup>4</sup>. It is, for most, a journey begun and continued, rather than a destination reached or goal achieved<sup>5</sup>. It is a journey undertaken in company with others, in ‘fellowship’, not one walked alone<sup>6</sup>.

The starting point of this journey of Scriptural Holiness lies for Wesley, both in theory and in the realities of his own life, in the experience of dissonance. From a very early age, encouraged particularly by the religious upbringing he received from his mother,

---

<sup>1</sup> Marie McCarthy, ‘Spirituality in a Postmodern Era’ in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. Woodward and Pattison, Blackwell, 2000, p196.

<sup>2</sup> Using ‘Scriptural Holiness’ here in the way Wesley used the phrase to describe the mission of Methodism as being ‘to spread Scriptural Holiness over the land’.

<sup>3</sup> These three form the core components of Wesley’s version of the ‘analogy of faith’, his basic theological position and hermeneutical strategy.

<sup>4</sup> As he comments on Ephesians 3:19 in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*: ‘That ye may be filled – which is the sum of all. *With all the fulness of God* – With all His light, love, wisdom, holiness, power and glory. A perfection far beyond a bare freedom from sin’.

<sup>5</sup> Wesley stoutly advocated that the goal was achievable and that he could name some of those who had ‘reached perfection’s height’. At the same time he admitted that he himself had not and that that was the case with most of the rest of us too, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Epworth Press, London, 1952, pp58, 62-69.

<sup>6</sup> This is what Wesley means by ‘there is no holiness but social holiness.’ His ‘social holiness’ does not include our agendas of social engagement, social justice or commitment to social issues; and when Wesley encourages us by his own example and word to engage in these things, as he does, he uses different language. This quote originated in controversy with the quietists who urged solitary religion, and against that, Wesley writes, ‘Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. ‘Holy solitaires’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness.’ (Preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739).

John Wesley was aware of the reality of sin and the need for faith, that there were two paths of life and that a choice had to be made between them, a choice which had eternal consequences. Whether or not as a child Wesley thought of himself as not being the person he ought to be, that he was a 'sinner' and that the gap between his life as it was and his life as it ought to be and could be was unbridgeable without the help of God, is open to question. The famous line from his *Journal* that until he was about ten years of age he had not 'sinned away that washing of the Holy Ghost which was given [him] in baptism' is instructive, as is what follows it<sup>7</sup>. It may reflect Wesley's childhood feelings, or the reflection of the older man. None the less, this legacy of puritan and evangelical Christianity was to shape Wesley's search for authentic Christian faith and experience in adult life, and, once that meaning and experience were found, would provide the engine and energy for his life's work of offering this meaning and experience to others. Alienated from God and unacceptable to him, he felt himself lost for eternity, worthy only of Hell. This was certainly the view of himself held by the 34 year old priest of the Church of England on his return from Georgia<sup>8</sup>, despite the fact that later on he modified that harsh view, saying, 'I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son'<sup>9</sup>.

The distinction between having the 'faith of a servant' and 'the faith of a son' is significant, and is one which Wesley came to use frequently in his preaching<sup>10</sup>. If we use it for the period between Wesley at age 10 and Wesley after May 1738 we can see what an intense matter 'the faith of a servant' was. In this period Wesley lived his religious life with great, and to his detractors laughable, seriousness. He was committed to rigorous personal discipleship, expressed in private prayer, Bible reading and almsgiving and to regular corporate worship and shared study, spiritual exercises and charitable service in groups. There was nothing frivolous or in any way irreligious about the young Wesley. From the serious schoolboy at Charterhouse, through the studious and meticulous member of the Holy Club at Oxford, to the ordained priest who went as a missionary to America, there is a single-mindedness of purpose, a commitment to the life of faith, a generosity of social concern and the highest standard of personal morality which adds up to an almost exemplary, if very intense, life and faith<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> In the *Journal* entry for May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1738 he gives an extended retrospect of his life and search to that point. The first sentence of the opening paragraph reads, 'I believe till I was about ten years old I had not sinned away that 'washing of the Holy Ghost' which was given me in baptism, having been strictly educated and carefully taught, that I could be saved 'by universal obedience, by keeping all the commandments of God' in the meaning of which I was diligently instructed.'

<sup>8</sup> In his *Journal* entry for October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1735, the day he sailed for Georgia, he notes that their reason for going was 'to save our souls'. In his comment on returning to England on January 31<sup>st</sup> 1738 he notes that 'I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God' (though in a later note he was to add – 'I am not sure of this') and after listing all he 'did know, say, give, do and suffer' concludes that he is still not 'justified' in the sight of God. He concludes that this American learning experience has taught him that he falls short of the glory of God, that his heart is corrupt, that he is alienated from God and a 'child of wrath' (but note the later note here too – 'I believe not') and an 'heir of hell'. Another one of these later notes says, 'I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son'.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> It is expounded fully in Sermon 9, 'The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption' and in another metaphor in Sermon 2, 'The Almost Christian,' which contrasts the 'Almost Christian' and the 'Altogether Christian.'

<sup>11</sup> Which is what any impartial reader would conclude from reading the full text of the *Journal* entry cited in note 7.

For Wesley, however, all this was not enough. There remained a fundamental sense of dissonance, a restlessness, a missing element<sup>12</sup>. So strong was Wesley's sense of need and incompleteness that he seems to have been driven almost to despair and depression, and an unsympathetic observer might justifiably describe him in this stage of his journey as neurotic or even pathological. The change came about at 8.45pm on 24<sup>th</sup> May in 1738. In his *Journal* entry for that day in which he describes his new experience, the crucial phrase is 'an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death'. It was at this point that Wesley felt, and that is a very important word for Wesley, that he was accepted, that his sins were forgiven and that he was 'saved'. That moment and that experience did not solve all his problems or meet all his needs, but that moment of 'assurance' seems to have given Wesley the sense of inner peace which his driven life had hitherto lacked. Whether the traditional naming of this experience as John Wesley's 'Conversion' is the best way to describe it is not my concern here, nor is the related question of whether this is the moment at which he was 'justified by grace through faith': but there is little doubt that the experience of 'assurance' received in that moment was a crucial point in Wesley's spiritual journey<sup>13</sup>.

His journey did not end there, and in terms of the practicalities of his life a whole new phase opened up from that moment which would take him externally and internally into undreamed of areas of change and personal development. He continued to be restless, to be aware of dissonance, to 'struggle against sin', but now largely without the huge levels of anxiety which prior to May 24<sup>th</sup> had both driven and disabled him. Thus it was that he did not rest content with his experience of 'justification' but went on to seek 'sanctification', and to make that search and the preaching of it the central plank of his mission<sup>14</sup>. The faith which he then preached and professed was no longer that of a servant but of a son; the experience he offered to others was that of receiving the 'spirit of adoption' by which they would be able to cry 'Abba, Father', and in which they would know and feel that healing light had broken in on their souls freeing them from both the guilt and power of sin<sup>15</sup>.

Marie McCarthy argues that the 'restless seeking for meaning, purpose and enduring values is the primary marker of the spiritual quest'<sup>16</sup>. Wesley's driven restlessness is obvious. She also points out that every authentic spirituality – her phrase not mine – is 'rooted in a tradition' which supplies its vocabulary and forms<sup>17</sup>. That of Wesley is the complex blend of puritan, evangelical and High Church Anglicanism of eighteenth century England in general and the rectory at Epworth in particular. She also points out that a spirituality will often embody a particular charisma, a 'particular

---

<sup>12</sup> See 'An Early Self-Analysis' in *John Wesley*, ed A Outler, Oxford University Press, New York, 1964, pp41-50. On 8<sup>th</sup> January, 1738, Wesley writes – 'By the most infallible of proofs, inward feeling, I am convinced: 1. Of unbelief – having no such faith in Christ as will prevent my heart from being troubled, when it could not be if I believed in God and rightly believed also in Christ; 2 – Of pride throughout my life past, inasmuch as I thought I had what I find I have not; 3 – Of gross irrecollection, inasmuch as in a storm I cry to God every moment; in a calm, not; 4 – Of levity and luxuriancy of spirit, recurring whenever the pressure is taken off, and appearing by my speaking words not tending to edify; but most by my manner of speaking of my enemies.', pp41f.

<sup>13</sup> See Outler, *op cit*, part 1, chapter 2, 'The Aldersgate Experience'.

<sup>14</sup> In the terms set out in note 2 above.

<sup>15</sup> See especially the two sermons cited in note 9 above.

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy in Woodward and Pattison, *op cit*, p194.

<sup>17</sup> *Op cit* p197.

manifestation of truth'<sup>18</sup>, and on this understanding it could be argued that the charism of Wesley's spirituality was the 'doctrine of assurance'<sup>19</sup>. McCarthy then goes on to describe six marks of 'authentic spirituality'<sup>20</sup>, and we will continue our exploration of the spirituality of 'Scriptural Holiness' by using her markers.

The first is *contemplative awareness*, a discipline which involves 'deep listening' marked by 'waiting, attending and presence', particularly nurtured in the practice of silence. From his diaries we see how Wesley kept his resolution "to devote (to retirement and private prayer) an hour morning and evening – no pretence or excuse whatsoever." In his sermon on 'The Means of Grace', in which he sets out the three principal ways in which spirituality is to be nurtured, the first of these is 'prayer – whether in secret or with the great congregation'<sup>21</sup>. It is of 'absolute necessity'. The second way of 'waiting' is by 'searching the Scriptures.' The third is not, as we might have expected, meeting in fellowship or in worship generally, but 'partaking of the Lord's supper' and in this section Wesley stresses the need for self-examination.

The journey of Scriptural Holiness is sustained therefore, for Wesley, by rigorous use of disciplined time in which we reflect on the state of our soul, on the one hand, and on the counsels of God on the other; being aware of self and of God and open to the moving of the Spirit in and towards us<sup>22</sup>.

The second is *effective action in the world*, which 'works towards the healing of the world and the wellbeing of all creation'. Wesley's own lifestyle is instructive here; from the prison visiting of the Holy Club at Oxford, through his own generosity of 'almsgiving' to the letter to Wilberforce at the end, Wesley's life was characterised by 'doing good'. Exaggerated claims should not be made about his contribution to reform in the eighteenth century – nor about Methodism's since – for he was neither the initiator nor the organiser of any major reform. He was, instead, 'an instinctively benevolent 'friend of mankind''<sup>23</sup> for whom faith was to be demonstrated in works. His instruction to the Methodists to 'do all the good you can, to all the people you can, in all the ways you can' was born out of his own reading of Scripture and backed by his own example. As was his sermon on 'The Use of Money' with its three points of 'Gain all you can', 'Save all you can' and 'Give all you can'<sup>24</sup>.

The third is *community* because spirituality is not an 'isolated, privatised, individual affair'. Wesley's 'Scriptural Holiness' had been 'social holiness' from the days of the Holy Club onwards, and the genius of his organisation was to create and sustain groups in which the early Methodists met regularly to 'build each other up', to encourage each other in their spiritual lives and in their common enterprise. As 'societies' emerged they were grouped into the larger units of 'circuits' and then into a 'connexion', while their members were formed into the smaller groups of 'classes'

---

<sup>18</sup> *Op cit* p199.

<sup>19</sup> As set out in Sermon 10, 'The Witness of the Spirit'.

<sup>20</sup> *Op cit* pp199-201.

<sup>21</sup> Sermon 12.

<sup>22</sup> We perhaps ought to add fasting to this list of ways of listening deeply to God, a practice Wesley advocates in Sermon 22, 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount 7'.

<sup>23</sup> H D Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, Epworth Press, London, 1989, p360.

<sup>24</sup> Sermon 44. For a more upbeat treatment of Wesley's action see T Runyon, *The New Creation – John Wesley's Theology Today*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1998 especially chapter 6 and David Guy's chapter 6 in *John Wesley – Contemporary Perspectives*, ed J Stacey, Epworth Press, London, 1988.

and 'bands.' 'Meeting together' for mutual support, encouragement and accountability was an essential part of the journey as far as Wesley was concerned.<sup>25</sup>

The fourth is *a disposition of openness*, especially an openness to the new and unexpected, an openness to a future that would be different and a willingness to risk. Many examples could be cited from the *Journal* of Wesley seeking guidance from the Bible or in prayer in his openness to the future and willingness to go where God would lead. Three major examples of real risk-taking openness are his venture into the new world of 'field preaching' in 1739, in which he 'submitted to be more vile' as he engaged in a task he found both theologically suspect and personally distasteful<sup>26</sup>, his acceptance of lay preaching also in 1739 and the reluctant brazenness of the ordinations of 1785. His mission policy was marked by countless new initiatives along the way, illustrating a spirituality marked by a pragmatics of openness. One of his legacies to the universal Church and an important liturgical expression of this aspect of the spirituality of Scriptural Holiness is the annual Covenant Service, first borrowed and used in 1755, the essence of which is an intensely personal reflection on the past year and a total willingness to be open for the future expressed in a corporate act of public worship.

The fifth is *non-dualistic thinking and acting*, in which life is integrated in a capacity to hold opposites together and to form a new synthesis, of contemplation and action, of private and public, individual and social. Some of the examples already cited illustrate this aspect of spirituality in Wesley, but perhaps the best is to be found in the title of Henry Rack's historical biography of Wesley and in the reason for Rack choosing it. Rack argues that Wesley's life was full of paradoxes – instances of opposites held together in a new synthesis – and that 'Reasonable Enthusiast' captures the main one, that Wesley was neither an 'enthusiast' nor a 'man of reason' in eighteenth century dualist terms, but a synthesis of both<sup>27</sup>. Methodist spirituality and history subsequently found that particular paradox difficult to maintain and the failure to do so contributed to the denominational splits of the nineteenth century. That dualistic tendency remains today, contrary to 'Scriptural Holiness' as envisaged and lived by Wesley though it is.

The last is *discernment*, and McCarthy's paragraph can be quoted in full,

'A final mark of authentic spiritualities is that they generally offer a set of guidelines and practices for discerning the path we are being called to follow. They invite us to put our lives in dialogue with the tradition through prayer, reflection, meditation, individual and group guidance, and other practices. They encourage attentive listening and awareness of how we are being called and where we are being led. In this sense authentic spiritualities are marked by a sense of obedience to something or someone larger than and beyond oneself. In the process of discernment one looks for certain signs such as a sense of inner and outer freedom, an awareness of the connectedness and interrelation of all creation, a rootedness in tradition coupled with openness to the new, and a sense of deep, inner peace.'<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> See chapter 10 of John Telford's, *The Life of John Wesley*, Epworth Press, London, 1947. This is a classic of Methodist hagiography – and why not!

<sup>26</sup> *Journal*, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1739.

<sup>27</sup> Rack, *op cit*. He quotes on the frontspiece the words of Alexander Knox that 'I think [Wesley] would have been an enthusiast if he could ... [but] there was a firmness in his intellectual texture which would not bend to illusion', see also ppxi-xii.

<sup>28</sup> *Op cit* p201.

In this paper we have attempted to sketch out Wesley's spirituality of 'Scriptural Holiness,' using Wesley himself as the exemplar of the spirituality he advocated. This paragraph from McCarthy demonstrates that his 'Scriptural Holiness' has all the marks of what she calls an 'authentic spirituality'. It can also be used as a summary both of his spirituality and of his life and mission, to which proper Wesley scholars could add details and examples at every point.