

‘The Methodist Tradition of Faith: Scriptural Holiness’

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The new life that begins now

So I'm in a rush and I am heading for Level 11 at the hospital. The elevator (lift) arrives and one man, a little older than me gets in. Now there are the two of us. There he is trapped in the lift with a man in a dog-collar, and he is looking at me very strangely. So I say, 'Here's the deal I'll announce the hymn and you sing - No 12'. And off he goes, 'All creatures of our God and King'. And the bell dings, doors open and we're out of the lift into the maze of corridors, and he says to me, 'Do you know where you are going?' And I reply, 'Immediately or ultimately: immediately I'm lost but ultimately I'm found!' He laughs nervously and I say I'm the Methodist minister from Plympton. And he says he's from Tavistock and we say goodbye and go our separate ways.

Did I give him the gospel? The good news is that for the Christian we can say, 'Ultimately I know where I am going - heaven is my destination because I am being saved.' I am one of those old-fashioned Christians who believes that we can be saved instantly and who affirms the words of Jesus, 'You must be born again' (John 3:7). Recently, Fiona and Michael, my two younger children, were asking me about the time of day they were born. I could give them the day and the time more or less to the minute. John Wesley, founder of the modern Methodist movement, could give the time of his new-birth more or less to the minute on May 24th, 'at about a quarter before nine'.

In fairness, you can meet someone who was born in a remote place, with access to neither calendar nor clock - the fact that they cannot give you date and time does not deny the reality of their life. Whether they know the date and time or not they know that they were born, because they are alive now and, even if no one else knows, God knows the day and minute. If that is the case physically, why should anyone deny it spiritually? Yet for some misguided Christians, the new birth is the end of the road, when really it is only the beginning.

A missionary was showing a visitor around the church on a South Sea Island. The visitor remarked how wonderful it was to hear people singing the old gospel song:

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought
Since Jesus came into my heart!
I have light in my soul, which so long I had sought
Since Jesus came into my heart!

The visitor's heart was stirred as he heard the young islanders sing the song, but even this did not prepare him for the news he heard as the missionary told him, 'Before they became Christians these people were cannibals!' This is the wonderful change that had come about because of the good news of Jesus. Now the idiom may have changed and the South Sea Islands are a long way away from us - but God has not changed. If we regard ourselves as morally and socially superior to South Sea cannibals, we had better have a long hard look in the newspapers (or at the TV news) and a long hard look in the mirror. Isn't our decadent, materialistic, self-obsessed society in need of news of salvation? And who makes up that society? Well, people just like us.

It may sound obvious but we can never tire of being reminded that we can be saved (a new life that begins with a new birth), because we have a wonderful Saviour - but let's be clear. Jesus is not our Saviour because he did mighty miracles (though he did). Jesus is not our Saviour because he told great stories (though he did). Jesus is not our Saviour because he

lived a perfect life (though he did). Jesus is our Saviour because he died for us on the cross. It is because of his obedience, even to death on the cross, that God exalted him. Our salvation is all of the blood of Jesus shed for us upon the cross, and because he is risen and alive it means he can deliver on his promises. ‘The gift of God is eternal life’ (Romans 6:23). The question must be, ‘when does eternal life begin?’ Well you might say it begins when you die – but how does that sit with all that we have said about the new birth? Eternal life begins now. If eternal life in heaven is holy and Christ-like, we are moving towards that now. To me, the notion that people who do not want to live for Jesus in this brief life, will somehow want to do that for all eternity is preposterous. It is the idea of living for Jesus now that is the very basis of holiness. This is full salvation.

The Scripture Way of Salvation

Central to John Wesley’s preaching was what he believed to be the Scripture Way of Salvation (Sermon 43, *Works [BE]* 2:158). This does not make it denominationally exclusive. Every Christian should be working out the scripture way of way of salvation. The trouble is that this requires some thought in an age where thinking is out of fashion. For Methodists, holiness is the end product of our view of the Scripture Way of Salvation. John Wesley believed that people are saved ‘by grace through faith’ and that justification by faith, though it was not popular with eighteenth century Anglicans (*Works [BE]* 11:16), was the doctrine of the Church, as well as of the Bible. Wesley’s plan of salvation is often summarised in the four brief statements commonly called the ‘Four Alls of Methodism’. In deference to the modern desire to be inclusive the word ‘men’ that used to follow ‘all’ is now omitted:

1. All need to be saved
2. All can be saved
3. All can know they are saved
4. All can be saved to the uttermost

All need to be saved

Wesley was in no doubt that all were in need of salvation. He had nothing to do with the denial of the doctrines of original sin and justification by faith (Hildebrandt 1951:92). For Wesley, a changed life, repentance, faith and holiness were fundamental to his understanding of salvation. His was the preaching of Jesus Christ whose grace is free to all and free for all but who nonetheless called upon all people to repent and to respond in faith (Langford 1998:6). In this Wesley was at one with Luther who believed that the whole life of the believer should be an act of repentance (Hildebrandt 1951:189). This salvation he believed and proclaimed was for all but Wesley’s preaching of the gospel of universal salvation and the grace of God for all should not be misunderstood in any way. This was not ‘universalism’ (the error that all will be saved, come what may – what the computer user would call the ‘default position’), for Wesley believed in the damnation of hell (*Works [BE]* 22:317).

All can be saved

Wesley’s conversations with the Moravians, in particular Peter Böhler, caused him to search the scriptures and the doctrinal formularies of the Church of England. He was then convinced, as Luther before him, that faith in Christ is only the instrument or means of appropriating salvation. However, the question remained as to whether that salvation was available to all or only to those whom God in his sovereign grace had elected and predestined

to salvation. In 1618, the Synod of Dort was convened to answer a five-point manifesto (Remonstrance) that is commonly known as 'Arminianism'. In contrast to what is commonly called 'Calvinism', John and Charles Wesley believed that all could be saved. The converse of election (being predestined to heaven) is reprobation (being predestined to hell). In the hymn that British Methodists today know as 'Father, whose everlasting love' (HP 520), Wesley shows his resolute opposition to the Calvinist idea of reprobation contending that those who hold that doctrine 'Horribly think that God is hate'. He summarises the Calvinistic doctrine and then calls upon God to act with regard to what he contends is the Calvinistic misrepresentation of divine grace.

'Thou hast compelled the lost to die,
Hast reprobated from Thy face;
Hast others saved, but them passed by,
Or mocked with only damning grace.'

How long, Thou jealous God! How long
Shall impious worms Thy word disprove,
Thy justice stain, Thy mercy wrong,
Deny Thy faithfulness and love?

Still shall the hellish doctrine stand,
And Thee for its dire author claim?
No: let it sink at Thy command
Down to the pit from whence it came.

Charles Wesley's original seventeenth and last verse is now the fifth and last verse:

Arise, O God, maintain Thy cause!
The fullness of the Gentiles (HP 'nations') call;
Lift up the standard of Thy cross,
And all shall own Thou diedst for all.

All can know they are saved

For John and Charles Wesley, the believer who had justifying faith should also expect to receive the gift of assurance. Although assurance has often been considered a theological oddity, peculiar to the Methodist tradition, Wesley claimed that his teaching on assurance was the same as the Puritans (*Letters* IV:126) and Luther (*Letters* III:159). It is not that the Christian hopes to be forgiven in the future but is forgiven now (Turner 1985:47). This is the very content of the Holy Spirit's assurance to the child of God, the Spirit that enables the believer to utter the words 'Abba, Father' (Romans 8:16). The Wesleys maintained that this was not just an experience of great saints but a privilege for all believers (Rattenbury 1953:65) and Charles Wesley did not hesitate to include teaching on assurance in his hymns (for example HP 216, 217).

All can be saved to the uttermost

Holiness is not something that we could look at in isolation from the other Methodist emphases. We have only looked at the first three, 'all need to be saved, all can be saved, all can know they are saved' very briefly but it is to the fourth point 'all can be saved to the

uttermost' that we must turn our attention. This somewhat odd expression is based on the KJV translation of Hebrews 7:25:

“Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

Wesley's paramount concern was holiness, full salvation – being saved completely. Beginning with doctrines of original sin and universal grace (all need to be saved) and preaching an unlimited atonement (all can be saved), Wesley called people to justifying faith. For Wesley, justification by grace through faith was the beginning and not the end of Christian experience. The believer should have assurance of salvation (all can know they are saved) and be growing in grace and holiness towards 'perfect love'. Such teaching inevitably brought him into conflict with quietism ('stillness'), Calvinism (predestination, unconditional election, limited atonement) and antinomianism (Wesley affirmed the importance of holiness rather than perseverance) which he regarded as dangerous. Methodists were not to practice stillness but to use all the means of grace (the sacraments, personal devotions and religious discipline). Methodists were committed to the optimism of grace (that nothing was beyond the saving grace of God). Methodists must not say they had a new life but continue to live the old one but instead to show the fruit of their salvation in love for God and all mankind and evidence this in worship, fellowship and practical service.

Imputed and imparted righteousness, the danger of antinomianism

Wesley assented to the traditional view of the Church of England (and the Reformed view) that, by faith, the righteousness of Christ is imputed (counted as the believer's). What Wesley could not accept, however, was any notion that imputation is simply a legal fiction (Rack 1989:452) or a cloak to cover our own continuing unrighteousness (Collins 1997:93). He constantly warned against the danger of resting in the imputed righteousness of Christ without any concerns for the impartation of that righteousness to produce a holy life (Wood 1967:262). His search was always for full salvation that is holiness or perfect love, which is made complete in the life of the believer by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Charles Wesley expressed it powerfully in these words:

O come and dwell in me,
Spirit of power within,
And bring the glorious liberty
From sorrow, fear, and sin.
The seed of sin's disease
Spirit of health, remove,
Spirit of finished holiness,
Spirit of perfect love.
(*Works [BE] 7:525; HP 293*)

Sanctification by faith alone

It is important to note that Wesley did not believe in justification by faith and sanctification by works. He believed in sanctification by faith alone (Williams 1969:175). Wesley's emphatic insistence is that perfect love is always God's gift to the believer (Townsend 1980:108). A key text for Wesley was 'Faith, working by love' (Galatians 5:6b), to him this was 'the essence of the Christian life' (Newton 1989:12). He wrote, 'The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness' (*Works XIV:321*). From the

beginnings of Methodism, Wesley and his followers sought to offer physical and psychological healing as well as salvation for the soul. ‘Both healing and salvation, synonymous in themselves, are implicit in the synonyms for Wesley’s central doctrine: entire sanctification, perfect love, Christian perfection and scriptural holiness’ (Cracknell 1998:69). It was this social reference that saved Wesley from mere introverted Pietism (Turner 1985:50).

Not infallible or absolute perfection

Wesley rejected any notion of Christians reaching infallible or ‘absolute perfection’ (Wood 1967:268). He did not believe in ‘sinless perfection’ (*Letters* IV:213). His sermon *Christian Perfection* considers many objections to the doctrine (Sermon 40, *Works [BE]* 2:99-124). He simply believed that it was possible for a Christian to have the grace not to sin wilfully (Outler 1991:72; Wainwright 1995:146-7). He fought tooth and nail against those who claimed that once God forgave a person there was nothing further to be done (Davies 1976:52). His constant emphasis was on the person and character of a Christian (Hildebrandt 1956:30). He looked for renewal of the individual after the image of Christ (Sermon 24, *Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount IV, Works [BE]* 1:531). In short, the Methodist teaching could be summed up in the two doctrines of justification and sanctification, ‘Christ dying for us’ and ‘Christ reigning in us’ (*Letters* VI:134). This was ‘the dual thrust of the Methodist message’ (Heitzenrater 1995:251).

Renewal in the image of God

One paragraph from the entry in Wesley’s *Journal* for 24 May, 1738, is well known above all others. It is the paragraph where he speaks of the heart ‘*strangely warmed*’. However, this paragraph, though it forms the whole of point fourteen is but one paragraph of eighteen which Wesley writes in his *Journal* for 24 & 25 May, 1738. Earlier (paragraph 13), John Wesley records:

I think it was about five this morning, that I opened my Testament on these words:

‘There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet i. 4).

(*Works [BE]* 18:249)

This quotation from the New Testament, which Wesley purposely marked out in the Greek text, reminds us of his ‘strong commitment to the Eastern Fathers, for whom *theosis*, “becoming what God is” is the supreme image of salvation’ (Cracknell 1998:52). The renewal of the individual in the image of God was the goal of the Christian life (Heitzenrater 1984:151). Perfection may sometimes be a misleading word but the King James Version uses the word ‘perfect’ to translate the Greek *teleios*. Wesley used ‘perfect’ because it was biblical (Smith 1997:7) and probably used it more than he realised (Sangster 1943:78). For Wesley perfection meant a purity of heart, inward holiness. Christ had commanded his disciples to be holy (Matthew 5:48). Wesley’s logic convinced him that God would not require from the Christian anything for which God himself did not provide the means. For Wesley the command implied the promise (Smith 1997:5). Wesley believed that it was possible for an individual to cease from sin. This is what being a Christian is really about (Smith 1997:5). The experience was not that the believer was unable to sin but always able not to sin (Smith 1997:9).

Holiness has an unattractive feel

Holiness has not had a good press in recent years. We had a teacher in school whom we used to call 'Holy Joe' and it was not a compliment. We use the phrase 'holier-than-thou' not to describe someone we aspire to be like but someone we do not aspire to be like. 'Holy people', especially those who tell you they are, seem so miserable. They seem to be *for* very little and *against* everything else. You look at the Bible that these 'holy people' read and you wonder about joy. Some people conclude from this that holiness is an outdated, primitive idea but I am not with them. Holiness is not so much primitive as eternal, not so much outdated as something that I believe that we very much need.

The danger of making holiness an arid theological concept

When both my parents were alive, many people said that I sounded like my Father and looked like my Mother. Now people argue about which of my children look most like me and which look most like their Mother. However, hard you tried to imitate me, my children would be better at it than you. The great Moravian leader, Zinzendorf, claimed that Christians in this life are 'miserable sinners' and have no 'inherent perfection' – 'Christ is our only perfection'. According to this view, Christian perfection is only 'imputed', not inherent; we are perfect only in Christ, not in ourselves. Wesley believed, however, that a child of God has the Father's characteristics. As the major characteristic of the Father is love, love must be the defining characteristic of the child. Salvation is then proved in a double way. It is proved by Scripture, it is proved by experience.

"Father of everlasting grace,
Thy goodness and thy truth we praise,
Thy goodness and thy truth we prove;"
(HP 300)

Paul describes how the new life (what he calls the 'life of the Spirit') and the sinful human nature (what is called in the King James Version and successive versions to that, the 'life of the flesh') co-exist within the believer. He tells the Galatians 5:16-17:

"Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other."

Wesley taught that repentance must be followed by growth in grace and holiness. To be holy is to show the nature and love of God in our lives. It is the family characteristic. Holiness and sanctification have the feel of theory about them but they are simply practical Christian living.

Perfect love

Wesley would never accept that physical death was necessary for the sinless life. If so, he said, death, rather than our Lord Jesus alone, has become a partial Saviour. If you need to die in order to cease from sin, what was it that Jesus did that was insufficient on the cross? Wesley felt that full salvation was not so much a matter of being cleansed from sin but filled with love. In other words, it's like having something in a bucket that's of a lesser density than what you're pouring in. As you pour in love so the stuff that's of a lesser density has to get out of the way. You're pouring love in and sin has to get out. In justification the

righteousness of Christ is imputed. That is the righteousness of Jesus is counted as ours. In perfect love the righteousness of Christ is imparted. That is we are transformed and renewed to be like him. In this we put no limits on the grace of God. Only the grace of God perfects in love. It is not achieved outwardly by abstention or by segregation for we see perfect love and holiness practised in Jesus who ate with tax-collectors and sinners.

The goal of personal holiness

The phrase, 'save completely', is an interesting one, the implication is that past salvation saves from some things but not from others. At first this sounds like a dreadful position to hold - when I was saved in the past, wasn't I saved completely? Think for a moment of a drowning man - he has been in the water for some time, he is cold, he is hungry, he is desperate, he is dying, he is perishing, he urgently needs saving. Suddenly, a lifeboat comes into view, the crewman's hand reaches out and pulls him in. He is saved - but not completely - he is no longer drowning, no longer perishing, but he is still cold, he is still hungry. At that moment in the lifeboat, though he has been saved, he is also being saved. He has changed from perishing to being saved. At the moment that the believer trusts in Jesus, the believer has simply allowed the work of Jesus to become effective, and the believer is saved, but it is not the end - it is the beginning. The believer is saved from the penalty of sin, which is death, and is no longer perishing but even being saved from the penalty of sin is only the beginning. This is a point that is often misunderstood. When asked how they *were saved* a thoughtful person could answer by faith in Jesus. When asked how they are *being saved* it is easy to answer in terms of self, by doing good works, by worship, by prayer, by Bible reading, by self-discipline.

Three theories

Arguments have centred on three theories of sanctification; eradication - rooting out the evil principle, suppression - crucifying the old nature, counteraction - rendering the old nature helpless. To which of these did John Wesley subscribe? In a general kind of way, to all three, but I think generally, the first - eradication. "Thou wilt the root remove, And perfect me in love" (*HP 735*).

The problem is that it views sin like a rotten tooth. You can view sin like a rotten tooth - just pull it out and all is well. The problem is that life doesn't always seem to be like that. Whatever the theoretical problems we must not let them extinguish the practical desire. That is if you're struggling now between eradication, suppression and counteraction, don't let that hinder you from heading on the path to holiness. What steps must we take? Let's learn something from the pattern of justification. The pattern of justification (that is being made right with God) is something like this: response to the grace of God in repentance; faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for remission of sin; expressing the new life in baptism of water or reaffirming what had been hoped for when we were baptised; knowing the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. I think it's those four and I think, normally, in that order.

Putting it into practice

The pattern of sanctification is therefore something like this: response to the grace of God in repentance. You say, I did that before. Yes, but you never prayed - "Show me as my soul can bear the depth of inbred sin" (*HP 540*). You didn't pray it because you didn't want to pray it or know about praying it and maybe you don't pray it now because you don't want to either. "Show me as my soul can bear the depth of inbred sin" - in other words it is response to the

grace of God in repentance, a new and fuller surrender. Second, it is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for freedom from sin. You say, I did that before. Yes, but you didn't pray - "O that I now, from sin released, Thy word may to the utmost prove, Enter into the promised rest, The Canaan of thy perfect love!" (HP 726). The third in my pattern of justification was the baptism of water or reaffirming what had been hoped for when we were baptised. The third stage here is similar. The baptism of fire. "Come, and baptise me now with fire, Nor let thy former gifts be vain:" (HP 291, two lines that echo the words of John the Baptist who said: "I baptise you with water. But one more powerful than I will come ... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16). The emphasis of this baptism of fire is not to be misunderstood as Pentecostal blessing but of personal transformation. The great British Methodist, Dr Sangster, put it this way:

"Many Christians live at a sub-Christian level. There is not enough difference between the people inside the Church and those outside to be impressive. In the Church's multitude of needs the need for holiness out-tops all the rest.

In the modern Church many members lack any sense of goal. Membership of the body of Christ is just membership. We do not say with bated breath, 'He wills that I should holy be'. In other words, what the world and the Church need are not more high powered salesmen of the Gospel but more free samples. Is it a coincidence that we are so short of the Christ-like Christian in an age where we have neglected teaching about it? When the teaching of holiness and perfect love is restored the magnetism of Christ is the hallmark of the Church. Don't worry too much about what I call the niceties of the theology of holiness. God is not a bureaucrat - you do not have to get the paperwork right before he blesses you.

Unbelief, disobedience and sin have entered the world. Men and women are caught in the vortex of evil, sin and guilt, the ensnaring power of sin and death and deserve only condemnation in the righteous judgment of God. ALL NEED TO BE SAVED.

Christ in obedience and faithfulness to God the Father has entered the world, has broken the web of evil, has defeated and overcome the power of sin, has triumphed over death and is able to present his people before the Father so that they may be forgiven through their faith and trust in him. ALL CAN BE SAVED.

The believer receives a new life. It begins with spiritual regeneration. The believer is born anew, from above, by the Spirit of God. A new life confirmed by the testimony of the Bible, by the inward witness of the Spirit by a new love for God and a new love for our neighbour giving the believer assurance of salvation. ALL CAN KNOW THEY ARE SAVED.

There is no limit to what God can do. The believer is not called to be saved only in the sense of being justified (counted as right before God). The believer is called to be holy (a "partaker of the divine nature"). This is not something abstract, but something practical, to love God and our neighbour with undivided hearts; to love as Christ loved in the world, to face suffering and rejection that he suffered, so that in the practical outworking of Christian faith it may be an earthly sign of the heavenly possibility. ALL CAN BE SAVED TO THE UTMOST.

We should not fall back now into quietism or to the error which says: “Let go and let God” (the great mistake of some holiness teaching) or any other misleading spirituality that may be the fashion of the day but seek that God will complete the work that he has begun within us. What we must do with regard to these four statements is this:

TRUST GOD AND GET GOING!

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