

Less than Perfect:

John Wesley and the Spread of
'Scriptural Holiness' over the Land

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Introduction

This essay will explore to what extent John Wesley failed or succeeded concerning his vision to ‘spread scriptural holiness over the land’. This will entail a treatment of this vision and particularly his understanding of ‘holiness’ (especially as it relates to ‘Christian perfection’), and then a consideration of factors which affected the way in which the legacy of holiness carried on after his death.

A Perfect Vision

Wesley’s vision was motivated by a sense of a need ‘to reform the nation, *more particularly the church*; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land’.¹ He found the Christianity of his time both ‘tepid and hypocritical’, and the only cure was scriptural holiness.² Maddox points out the wide variety of activities this spread of holiness was to be characterised by (prison visitation, preaching to coal miners, as well as lay preaching), which were all seen as key and equal tasks as a part of the reforming vision.³

Wesley’s ‘holiness’ doctrine was expressed via a vocabulary which included a wide range of terms such as: “sanctification”, “Christian (or scriptural) perfection”, “perfect love”, and “salvation continued”.⁴ He described holiness as ‘faith working by love’, ‘the fullness of faith’, as ‘pure love filling the heart and governing all words and actions’ and as reflecting the ‘interaction of God’s gracious activity and human response [reaching] its climax in sanctification, the goal of the mature Christian life.’⁵

An apt house metaphor, developed later when Methodism was beginning to take shape, captures the significance of holiness in Wesley’s thought; seeing it as one of three key doctrine characteristic of later Methodism: repentance, the ‘porch’ of religion; justification, the ‘door’ of religion; and sanctification (holiness) as ‘religion itself’.⁶

¹ Quoted in Randy L. Maddox, ‘Visit the Poor: Wesley’s Precedent for Wholistic Mission’, *Transformation* 18(1): (2001), 38 (emphasis in Maddox, not Wesley).

² *Ibid.*, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ John Lawrence Brasher, *The Sanctified South: John Lakin Brasher and the Holiness Movement* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 1994), 26; and Kenneth L. Waters Sr., ‘Holiness in New Testament Perspective’ *The Holiness Manifesto*, Eds Kevin W. Mannoia and Don Thorsen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 55.

⁵ Again, Brasher, *The Sanctified South*, 26; and Waters Sr., ‘Holiness’ *Manifesto*, 55.

⁶ Kenneth J. Collins, ‘John Wesley’ *The Encyclopedia of Christianity, Volume 5*, Eds Erwin Fahlbusch, et al (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 728.

Holiness as 'Perfection' (or 'Perfect Love')

Wesley's sermon "The Circumcision of the Heart" is a key example of the link between his understanding of 'entire sanctification' (or 'perfection') and scriptural holiness, as well as his desire and commitment to establish the doctrine by use of Scripture.⁷ For example, Wesley draws upon 2 Corinthians 7:1 ("cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit"), Ephesians 4:23 ("be renewed in the spirit of your mind") and Matthew 5:48 ("Be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.") to establish his point about 'that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness.'⁸

This doctrine of "Christian Perfection" has been one of the more misunderstood and controversial of Wesley's teachings. Collins notes that the doctrine 'represented the actualisation by grace through faith of the twofold great commandment of Jesus Christ: to love God with all one's heart and one's neighbour as oneself.'⁹ For Wesley, 'perfection' didn't suggest that a sinless state could be achieved on earth, but rather referred to 'the state of a life so surrendered to God in perfect love that willful sinning was effectively eliminated.'¹⁰

Inner Intentions & Outer Works

Wesley saw holiness both as an 'inward quality of the soul' and as an 'outwardly manifested quality', which is further reflected in his statements about 'inward and outward holiness' and/or 'holiness of life and thought'.¹¹ Commenting on the Beatitudes, Wesley held that 'though they are internal, are also always social'.¹²

This balanced understanding didn't prevent Wesley from putting a strong emphasis on the necessary flow from inward 'holy intention(s)' to outward 'works'. This can be seen in his language relating these 'holy intentions' to 'works of mercy' and 'works of piety'. Interestingly, Long notes the seemingly retroactive relationship in Wesley between them, summarising that '[w]e do not do works of mercy because

⁷ Collins, 'John Wesley' *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 729.

⁸ John Wesley, 'Sermon Seventeen: The Circumcision of the Heart,' Wesley Center Online. http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/sermons/017.htm, (accessed 19.11.09); section I.1.

⁹ Collins, 'John Wesley' *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 729; see also Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007), 352.

¹⁰ David Hempton, 'John Wesley (1703-1791)' *The Pietist Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Ed. Carter Lindberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 258.

¹¹ Waters Sr., 'Holiness' *Manifesto*, 54.

¹² D. Stephen Long, *John Wesley's Moral Theology: The Quest for God and Goodness* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005), 157.

we have a holy intention; we do works of mercy in hopes that our intentions will be made holy.’¹³

Wesley seemed aware of the tension between the reality (on one hand) that external acts such as works of mercy ‘cannot infallibly verify holy intention’, and the reality (on the other hand) that this holy intentionality is nonetheless seen through them, and that ‘we cannot claim a holy intention without attending to these works.’¹⁴

This passion for holiness evidenced through works of mercy was not something that Wesley only preached about in pulpits, but also in personal correspondence. For example, Maddox recounts an interesting dialogue between Wesley and the wealthy (and less-than-inclined to visit the poor) Miss J.C. March.¹⁵ The dialogue ends with Wesley expressing concern that her slowness to visit the poor will leave her with ‘lower degrees of holiness’ than Christians are called to by God.¹⁶

Holiness and the Grace/Works Tension

Not surprisingly, his emphasis on concrete (and uncomfortable) ‘works’ led some to accuse him of setting aside grace. Wesley himself, however, had a strong theology of grace. He understood sanctification (growth in holiness) as a ‘lifelong process of daily cooperation with God’s grace’, accompanied by growth in love (of God and neighbour) trust (in the grace of Christ) and joy (in the presence of the Spirit); and saw it never as denoting sinless perfection, but instead ‘the believer’s purity of Christian intention.’¹⁷

Wesley, being familiar with biblical, theological and patristic thought, was able to make use of Romans 3:31 (“Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.”), seeing holiness as a means of establishing the ‘moral law’, which truly found its end in ‘love’.¹⁸

Further, for Wesley, holiness (or ‘perfection’) was not a self-made thing, but was rather the evidence of active faith working not only to refrain from evil, but also to intentionally do good.¹⁹ Hempton helpfully identifies Wesley’s stress on ‘human

¹³ Ibid, 158.

¹⁴ Ibid, 159, 161.

¹⁵ Maddox, ‘Visit the Poor’ *Transformation*, 46-7.

¹⁶ Ibid, 47.

¹⁷ Brasher, *The Sanctified South*, 27.

¹⁸ Waters Sr., ‘Holiness’ *Manifesto*, 55; even if one objects to the (possibly) interpretive step from the Law of Moses to the ‘moral law’, for Wesley to grasp that both are surpassed by ‘Love’ remains a hard result to argue with biblically.

¹⁹ Ibid, 55.

dependence on grace in all its manifestations – prevenient, justifying, sanctifying, sacramental, and universal.’²⁰ Indeed, for Wesley the absolute need for grace in all its forms (and at all points) did not nullify the high and holy calling upon every Christian.

A Less-than-Perfect Legacy

Modified Message?

So, how well has the holiness legacy fared? Well, first there is the question of to what extent later Methodism reflected the teaching of John Wesley – particularly his understanding of ‘holiness’ and/or ‘perfection’.

Highly influential Methodist leader Phoebe Palmer ‘won a newly receptive and broader audience for the doctrine’, but this was accompanied by a modification of Wesley’s emphasis from holiness and perfection being both a lifelong goal and present possibility to it being ‘a present obligation here and now.’²¹

Brasher also notes that later post Civil War American proponents of holiness had missed Wesley’s emphasis further still. For example, they opted for Spirit language over Christ language (in keeping with their more Charismatic tendencies) and placed emphasis on ‘gifts’ as opposed to ‘fruits’ of the Spirit, and saw perfection as a kind of “second blessing” event, rather than a life-long process.²²

Hempton also makes reference to the concurring view of David Martin that ‘the explosion of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century... can best be explained as a *much-modified* continuation of the Methodist holiness tradition’.²³

Splitting and Steaming?

Structural and strategic issues may also be factors in the later health of Wesley’s holiness legacy. The early Methodist movement had a fairly hierarchical structure. ‘Discipline was strict and expulsions were common’, and it became ‘prone to frequent splits after Wesley’s death’.²⁴

Kent holds that the movement lost momentum due to ‘Wesley’s steady emphasis on holiness’, particularly when he had no further new teaching to respond with ‘once circumstances forced him to admit the limitations’ of his doctrine of

²⁰ Hempton, ‘John Wesley’ *The Pietist Theologians*, 259.

²¹ Brasher, *The Sanctified South*, 28; and McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 352-3.

²² Brasher, *The Sanctified South*, 29-30.

²³ Hempton, ‘John Wesley’ *The Pietist Theologians*, 256 (emphasis mine).

²⁴ *Ibid*, 259.

holiness.²⁵ He adds that the Wesleyan drive for an alternative society was not fully successful, stating that whilst the meetings were spontaneous and joyous, the ‘rules of the world differed from those of the meeting’.²⁶ If Kent is right, then Wesley’s original two fold holiness-spreading vision to reform both society *and* church may have primarily been achieved only in the case of the latter.

But there are high points to close with as well. In 1909 (nearly 120 years after Wesley’s death in 1791), Methodism could boast ‘some eight point seven million Methodist church members and around thirty-five million Methodist worshippers spread over four continents.’²⁷ Also, the Methodist Church in America, organised in 1784, continued in its adoption of the Wesleyan vision of spreading holiness up to the first decade of the nineteenth century.²⁸

Collins points out that Wesley’s signing of the ‘Deed of Declaration’ in 1784 ‘made provision for the continuance of Methodism in England’, as did his ordination of Richard Whatcoat, Thomas Vasey for Methodism in the United States of America.²⁹ Also, the work of Albert Outler ‘rediscovered Wesley in the context of many theological traditions’, and helped Wesley’s thought to rise to the place it has today all around the world.³⁰

On the whole, whilst the surviving structural housing of Methodism may have flourished in modified forms, it is hard to say that the particular emphasis of Wesley’s on holiness significantly survived much past his death. We can be grateful for his recent rediscovery in the 20th century, and the interaction with and implementation of it since then.

²⁵ John Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleyans* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 99.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 67.

²⁷ Hempton, ‘John Wesley’, *The Pietist Theologians*, 256.

²⁸ Brasher, *The Sanctified South*, 27.

²⁹ Collins, ‘John Wesley’ *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 729.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 729.

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