

Mr. Wesley and Me – Thank You, Mr. Wesley

by Lieutenant Nicola Poore

Why all the fuss about Mr. Wesley? As Salvationists, we cannot escape our Wesleyan Methodist roots; nor would we want to. In reflecting on his youth, General William Booth observed, “To me there was one God, and John Wesley was his prophet.”

Wesley’s theology begins and ends with love. Perfect love. The apostle John states, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” (1 John 4:18). Love is always our starting point, our primary interpretive lens, through which we make sense of the Scriptures and our lives. As an endpoint too, having reflected and wrestled with the Scriptures, we return to the love of God. Wesleyans are delightfully caught in the gravity of God’s love.

We affirm that God is love. We understand that God so loved the whole world – that is, the entire created order – that He gave His only son. We wholeheartedly embrace the notion that the love of Christ, albeit Christ’s love or our love for Christ, compels us and motivates our activity. Grand Wesleyan themes such as Christian perfection or universal atonement are the inevitable outworking of a theological foundation of love. We ought to thank God for Mr. Wesley.

But does it really matter whether or not we know our Wesleyan heritage? Yes, I believe so. It matters because people need to know that salvation is available to all. It matters because people need to know that they can live with assurance of their salvation. It matters because people need to know that it is entirely possible to be made holy in this life. Each of these threads and more are woven into the DNA of The Salvation Army. We are custodians of a marvelous heritage.

Having said that, we are faced with significant challenges in preserving our Wesleyan voice. Wesleyan scholar David McEwan put it well in a paper on just this subject entitled, “Denominational Identity in a World of Theological Indifferentism.” It is not so much the threat of religious pluralism, as our own indifference, or perhaps ignorance, towards our theological compass that is most alarming.

There is, of course, a way forward that is not so far removed from the plight of the Wesleys in the 18th century. While John Wesley is commonly referred to as the “Founder of Methodism,” the Methodist revival in England was greatly fuelled by the creative contribution of John’s younger brother, Charles. Many a noble theme expounded by John was lovingly crafted into poetry and set to music by Charles Wesley. SASB 419 is a good example of such a hymn:

Come, Saviour, come and make me whole,
Entirely all my sins remove;
To perfect health restore my soul,
To perfect holiness and love.

The hymns of Charles Wesley were critical in converting and discipling the predominantly illiterate, working class masses of the Methodist revival. In a very real way, the first Methodists *were* what they sang. Shouldn't that be the case for us, too?

Consider this a shout-out to all songwriters, poets, actors, filmmakers, artists, graphic designers, teachers, preachers and more! Let's re-present the glorious themes and treasures of our God-given heritage in ways that are meaningful and accessible in our day. Ours is a voice that needs to be heard. Thank you, Mr. Wesley.