

Practical, Accessible, Inward Holiness

by Soldier Aaron White

John Wesley's disciplined Christian spirituality, as seen in extracts of his writings from 1733-1743, aimed to make personal and corporate holiness a present, attainable reality for all believers. Wesley believed that holiness was accessible to each and every person. His method of helping Christians pursue this holiness was thoroughly practical and comprehensive, offering clear strategies and aids such as self-examination, instructions on spiritual reading and forms of prayer, and emphasis on the means of grace offered by the Church. Undergirding this pursuit was belief in the gift of complete inward holiness, an experiential knowledge of freedom from sin that resulted in the revival of the image of God in each believer.

Wesley's writings display the conviction that no one was inherently disqualified from choosing the life of faith and holiness. Wesley taught that the entirety of humanity was in need of God's loving-kindness and deliverance from rebellion, and having been created in God's image, humans were all "capable of knowing and loving [God] eternally." (83) In his journal Wesley described himself as having been "ignorant of the righteousness of Christ, which, by a living faith in him, bringeth salvation to everyone that believeth." (105) This faith, in Wesley's estimation, was a gift from God, but it was also comprised of the voluntary renunciation of one's will and the desires of humanity, alongside a firm resolution to follow Christ. (78, 81-82) Though not easy, Wesley believed this was obtainable, because Christ died for all so that all may live for him. (78) As a result, Wesley prayed expansively for people to receive God's grace, love and mercy, because he hoped that all might gain the opportunity to become God's faithful servants. (83) The belief in the universal potential for holiness likewise inspired perseverance in mercy and evangelism to all, evidenced in this question to be used for self-examination: "Have I given anyone up till he [sic] expressly renounced me?" (86) Finally, those who wished to be disciples in Wesley's United Societies had to show that they desired "to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins" through freely chosen repentance and submission to Christ. (109)

For those who did desire to be saved from their sins, Wesley designed pragmatic tools to help in the journey towards full holiness. Rigorous self and group examination was a key part of Wesley's program, and by such work he believed Christians would "daily meet with some means of drawing nearer to God." (78) He prescribed schemes of self-applied questions that scrutinised all aspects of one's life, to be used mornings and evenings and when preparing for prayer and devotion. (79, 82) These questions helped one to recollect sins and faults so as to better repent of them, and to remember to be zealous about growing in virtue and doing good. (86) They focused primarily on examining devotion to God and practical love towards others. (86-87) Similar interrogations were to be undertaken within groups of friends, to enable people to work out their salvation together and to use agreed upon signs to hold one another accountable. (85, 108) Members of the United Societies asked one another weekly about avoiding specific evils and participating in good works enjoined by Scripture. (108-109) Wesley personally knew the need for this type of self-examination and

accountability, confessing in his journal the sin of “gross irrecollection, inasmuch as in a storm I cry to God every moment; in a calm, not.”(99)

A second practical help to holiness was Wesley’s advice for spiritual reading and his creation of comprehensive forms of prayer. Wesley’s journal reveals how powerfully he was affected by various books.(101, 103, 107) It is therefore unsurprising that he gave thorough instructions to followers on the benefits and proper methods for devotional reading, including when to read, how to read, how to recollect what was read, what results one should expect from reading, and how to prepare one’s soul through prayer and pure intentions.(86, 88-89)

The specificity, practicality and comprehensiveness of Wesley’s advice on reading was matched or exceeded by his directions concerning prayer. Wesley was ever-growing in the personal knowledge that progress in holiness was impossible without crying out for God’s “help from his holy place.”(107) He thus created forms of prayer for every day of the week and for other important occasions.(77) These prayers embraced the whole of one’s individual life and society, including prayers for the King, the Royals, Clergy, Nobility, Universities, Gentry, Commons, Magistrates, family, friends, relations, the oppressed, the ignorant, the sinful, and all people for whom one was responsible.(81-84) There were prayers for faithfulness in the routine duties of the day, and prayers for deliverance from sins highlighted during self-examination.(80-81, 83) Temporal blessings were remembered in prayer as well as spiritual ones, with thanksgiving for physical necessities alongside requests for opportunities to be built up in faith, love and obedience.(82-83) A significant part of Wesley’s schemes for self-examination involved remembrances on how, when and where to pray each day and hour.(85)

A third major tool that Wesley insisted upon for the development of practical holiness was the use of the means of grace available through the ministry of the Church. Wesley saw his efforts as an extension of the Church’s work, and believed the unity of the Church was a certain Scriptural command.(101) As such, Wesley created special forms of prayer to coincide with days the Church had traditionally set aside for rejoicing, mourning, and intercession.(77) He taught believers that they would know their Christian duty by following the direction of “our excellent Church, in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures”.(77, 101) He thanked God for being born in the Church to Christian parents, as well as for the blessings of baptism, public worship, good teaching, fellow believers, and the Lord’s Supper.(80) Members of his United Societies were to show their desire to be saved in part by attending upon these same ecclesiastical “ordinances of God.”(110) He instructed people to pray for good life and sound doctrine amongst the clergy, and for the protection of the Church “against schism, heresy, and sacrilege.”(81, 84) Wesley advised regular self-reflection regarding one’s involvement in and promotion of the Church, including questions about morning and evening Church attendance; praying with fervour upon going in and out of Church; and persuading all “to attend public prayers, sermons and sacraments, and in general to obey the laws of the Church Catholic [and] the Church of England.”(85-86) All of this shows Wesley’s belief that holiness was not to be sought outside the boundaries of the Church. The teaching,

sacraments, fellowship and worship offered by the Church were indispensable aids to the sanctified Christian life.

With the help of down-to-earth tools like self-examination, instructions on spiritual reading and prayer, and devoted Church participation, Wesley wanted Christians to know and experience full freedom from the ongoing power of sin. He described this freedom as inward holiness, and it was the goal towards which those who were not yet perfect should aim.(88) Wesley taught that this perfection was derived from the five successive stages of Christian duty.(77-78) The first four duties – renunciation, thorough devotion to God, self-denial, and mortification – led ultimately to Christ living completely in the believer, which is “the fulfilling of the law, the last stage of Christian holiness. This maketh the man [sic] of God perfect....Grace hath had its full work upon his [sic] soul.”(78) This perfection was earthly, and it meant that the believer’s will, desire, heart, thoughts, words and actions were wholly given over to God.(78) Wesley advised followers to pray for an “entire indifference” to all things but God, as their selfish desires would be utterly consumed once they had personally tasted of God’s grace.(81) This experiential knowledge of God’s goodness was the final key to holiness. Once Christians had this experience, their loving obedience would become “like that the holy angels render to [God] in heaven.”(81) From this belief Wesley could teach people to confidently ask and expect God to end their sin and misery, perfect their repentance, and let his love fill and rule their souls.(82-83) True religion, according to Wesley, was not simply a list of external behaviours to avoid through one’s own strength, but was rather a loving, grateful, obedient response to an encounter with grace which restored God’s sanctified image in the life of the believer.(86)

Wesley taught about inward holiness as he learned it through his own life experiences. His journal reveals that the methods he prescribed in his schemes for self-examination, prayers, spiritual reading and submission to the Church were not enough, in and of themselves, to produce true holiness in him. He understood himself to be very religious, and outwardly obedient to Scriptural commandments, but an “inward feeling” proved to him that something was missing.(99) He did not possess the inward witness of holiness, nor did he have the certainty of salvation when facing a near-death experience, and he credited this to still trusting in his own righteousness.(102, 104) He confessed that he “was only striving with, not freed from, sin. Neither had [he] the witness of the Spirit with [his] spirit.”(105) This was why Peter’s Bohler’s teaching that true faith in Christ meant having “dominion over sin, and constant peace from a sense of forgiveness,” was like a “new Gospel” to him.(105) The testimony of those whose sanctified lives matched the commands of Scripture gave him hope that it was actually possible, as it proclaims in 2 Peter 1:4, to be “partakers of divine nature.”(106) His experience of full forgiveness and freedom at the society meeting in Aldersgate Street seemed to turn his ideas about holiness into a lived reality.(107) Prior to this, even though he practiced and taught about holiness, he still experienced being conquered by sin. Subsequent to this inward experience of God’s grace, he now claimed, like a conqueror, to have the “peace and victory over sin” that “are essential to faith.”(107)

Wesley understood holiness as the recovery of the image of God in each person. This picture of a deepening union with God may strike a chord with people who long for spiritual connection and meaning but dismiss religion as nothing more than cold theory and empty systems. Wesley's holiness teaching was hopeful, asserting that God makes his grace available without discrimination, and that the power of sin may be overcome through the transformative gift of God. For those who, like Wesley, find themselves overwhelmed by the discrepancy between the commands of Scripture and the reality of their sinful lives, this idea of accessible, inward holiness may be spiritually liberating. Wesley's vision of holiness was also pragmatic and active, giving people straightforward ways to participate in their journey towards sanctification. This hands-on spirituality may help embody the teachings of Christ in a world that is disconnected from Scripture and Church tradition in general, and from the idea of holiness in particular.