

## The 'end' of discipleship: John Wesley's vision of real Christianity

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Wesley has made an excellent guru for scholars and leaders in search of general principles and universal techniques for ministry. But the heart of what Wesley has for us today lies in his compelling vision of the Christian life itself. It was his vision of forming a holy people, capable of being a living witness to the Gospel in uncertain times, that captured his imagination and directed his own search for 'whole-life discipleship'.

### For reflection

- What vision of the Christian life captures your imagination?
- Is it capable of inspiring the development of disciple-making practices that will lead to a life-transforming relationship with God and with the world?

Why would twenty-first-century Christians turn to an eighteenth-century Anglican priest for inspiration about mission, evangelism and making disciples in our contemporary culture? In the case of John Wesley, the answer may seem obvious. He was the founder of a movement that grew from a few young men, meeting together in an Oxford University study-room, to a nationwide connexion of evangelical 'societies', and eventually into a major international denomination.

The rapid expansion of early Methodism might inspire us to examine Wesley's life and ministry as an example of 'effective' Christian leadership. We could examine his career as an itinerant evangelist, with the apostolic vocation of proclaiming the Gospel and planting new Christian communities among 'unchurched' people. We could examine the 'charismatic' and revivalistic nature of his evangelism as a reminder that we depend upon the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit for making disciples. We could examine his fascination with the early church and 'primitive Christianity' as a precursor to the 'ancient-future' church movement and our current fascination with radical and emerging ecclesiologies. We could observe his organisational genius for clues about how to gather people into small groups, connect them in local societies and bind them together in communicative networks. Or we could regard his commitment to mutual accountability in the formation of disciplined Christian fellowship as a model for making disciples.

Yet we could follow any of the above lines of enquiry, and more, and be liable to miss that which precedes them all: Wesley's compelling vision of the Christian life itself. This vision, which he called 'Christian perfection', captivated his imagination, reordered his desires and directed his own spiritual quest for 'whole-life discipleship'. It is my view that early Methodism really grew out of Wesley's own pursuit of holiness in heart and life, as his spiritual vision came to be shared with others and as they gathered together to help one another seek it. This common vision and common life began in the 'Holy Club' at Oxford, and spread from there through the formation, multiplication and connection of societies across the nation. Wesley and his preachers considered Christian perfection to be 'the grand depositum' of Methodism, and the self-avowed end of the movement was 'to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land'. Whatever Wesley thought or said or did, it was inspired, shaped and directed by

the end of forming a holy people who, in the pursuit of perfection, were capable of being a living witness to the Gospel in uncertain times.

### **A vision worth staking our lives upon**

The very talk of 'perfection' will no doubt fill many readers with dread! On the one hand, the Latin word *perfectio*, from which the English word 'perfection' comes, has the meaning of absolute metaphysical or divine perfection, being without defect of any kind. On the other hand, our technological culture has predisposed us to think of perfection in terms of absolute efficiency, flawless functionality, and being equally incapable of either failure or improvement. Clearly, both divine perfection and technological perfection are states quite beyond the reach of human attainment. Moreover, the expectations of such perfection – either self-imposed or required by others – are experienced as a burden too great for any of us to bear. Far from calling forth a life of virtue and excellence, holding out the goal of such perfection is more likely to engender disillusion, despondency and despair. We are right to be wary of striving for perfection.

Wesley, however, draws his terms from certain key texts in the King James Version of the Bible which translate the Greek word *teleios*, meaning the goal of Christian discipleship, in terms of 'perfection' (cf. Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:15; Heb. 6:1; and 1 Jn. 4:18). He was a student of New Testament Greek and would have known that *teleios*, in these texts, meant being complete or fully-grown in the Christian life. Indeed, he insisted that Christian perfection was not an absolute perfection (*perfectio*), in either the divine or the technological sense, but the goal or end (*telos*) of a life aiming at spiritual maturity (*teleios*) understood in scriptural terms. It is a scriptural doctrine to strive after this 'perfection' or maturity because the character of spiritual maturity is itself the summation of scriptural injunctions about the Christian life.

Above all, Christian perfection is perfection in love (1 Jn. 4:18), a fulfilment of the Great Commandment to love God and neighbour (Mt. 22:36-39). Wesley describes it as the fullness of God's own loving presence and power overflowing in our love of neighbour, and thus returning to God in joyful prayer and thankful praise. As such, Christian perfection is not an accomplished state of being, but a dynamic way of life

which flows from the most intimate and life-transforming relationship with God and extends to one's neighbour in mutual love and service. This life cannot be procured and possessed by our own ingenuity but is the gift of God's own life imparted to us, and Christ's own virtues reproduced in us, by the work of the Holy Spirit. In short, it is to have the mind which was in Christ (Phil. 2:5) and to walk as Christ walked.

Christian perfection is to have a heart and life fully renewed in the image of God (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10). It is a personal holiness that comes from our moment-to-moment dependence upon Christ as Prophet (shedding his light on the way), as Priest (offering his forgiveness along the way) and as King (supplying his strength for the way). It is, therefore, founded upon a *humility* that celebrates all our holiness to be dependent upon the work of Christ *for us* in reconciling us to God, and the work of his Spirit *in us* enabling the law of love to be fulfilled. This humility is inseparable from a *faith* that sees God's providence in all things, a *hope* that takes communion with God as our true end, and a *love* that unites us with God in time and eternity (1 Cor. 13). Christian perfection is, therefore, a life shaped by the *fruit* of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) and the *witness* of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14-16), filled with the peaceful assurance of our acceptance as children of God through the merits of Christ, and of the Spirit's power to keep us from all sin.

For Wesley, the primary marks of this perfection in love are rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all circumstances (1 Thes. 5:16-18). The constancy and ubiquity of such joyful prayer and thankful praise belong to those whose hearts are ordered by love alone and whose minds are fixed upon God alone, whose thinking, speaking, feeling and acting are ruled exclusively by the love of God and neighbour. The pursuit of Christian perfection, or 'holiness in heart and life', is Wesley's language for 'whole-life discipleship'. It is a spiritual maturity that describes not only a *fullness* of God's love, reordering all our self-centred and worldly desires, but a *completeness* of devotion and dedication to God's will in every aspect of our lives. Perfection in love is embodied in *works of piety* – including all kinds of prayer, searching the Scriptures, receiving the Lord's Supper, participating in Christian fellowship, fasting or abstinence; and in *works of mercy* – doing all the good we can for the physical and spiritual needs of whomever God should bring our way: family, friends, neighbours, strangers and enemies. It is a diligent witness to the truth

of our faith in whatever circumstances we may be found: at home, in the workplace, or at church. These good works flow from the fullness of our communion with God and, as such, become the means of grace by which that fullness is sustained in our hearts, extended through our lives, and returned to God in joyful prayer and thankful praise.

### **A vision worth striving for together**

Interestingly, it was not Wesley's account of 'perfection' that caused the most controversy, but his claim that it was actually attainable in this life, and that all real Christians should agonise for it. From the moment of new birth, we are to strive continually for a gradual growth in grace, with the expectant hope that God will finally root out the sin that remains, in a moment of perfecting love. The distinguishing mark of a Methodist, however, was not the *attaining* of perfection but the *striving* after it and the way of disciplined discipleship which it called forth (cf. Eph. 4:13). This took shape in what Wesley called the 'Methodist plan', or a whole 'spiritual economy' of practices that were capable of leading persons from the initial experience of evangelical conversion and on to perfection in love. The formation of this 'plan', however, was not the result of some strategic exercise aimed at developing the spiritual 'machinery' needed to produce mature disciples. Rather, the practices that were to characterise the Methodist movement arose over time, inspired by the practical wisdom of its members and the influence of others they encountered along the way.

The Pietists of the holy living tradition inspired Wesley and a few others to form the Holy Club as a means for pursuing their emerging vision of holiness in heart and life, by 'provoking one another' to love and good works. Later, through his contact with the Moravians, Wesley came to see that this pursuit of holy living must be founded upon the evangelical experience of forgiveness and new birth. His evangelistic preaching consequently invited people into *a new personal relationship* with God through faith in the merits of Christ (i.e. justification), *a new freedom* from the tyranny of sin through the power of the Spirit (i.e. sanctification), and *a new possibility* of being perfected in love. The challenge of evangelistic preaching and

Christian witness, therefore, was not to make a lone decision for Christ, but to join a community that was capable of making real Christian disciples.

Those who responded to this message of salvation and holy living were joined together into societies, with new ones planted if necessary, in order that they might pray together, receive the word of exhortation (cf. Heb. 13:22), watch over one another in love (cf. Eph. 6:18) and help each other to work out their salvation (Phil. 2:12). The only condition for membership in a Methodist society was the desire to 'flee from the wrath to come' (Mt. 3:7; cf. 1 Thes. 1:10): in other words, to forsake sin and seek the Gospel of salvation. This was not merely the evangelical experience of sins forgiven, but the 'full salvation' of sinful desires rooted out in the experience of perfect love, the possibility of a life fully devoted to God and neighbour.

Methodist societies were originally subdivided into 'classes' of twelve people as an economic expedient for raising money to cover building repairs. As class leaders went from house to house making their collections, however, they discovered a great need for spiritual guidance among the members. Eventually, these classes were gathered together as small groups, in order to hold one another accountable for seeking salvation through works of repentance and faith. Mutual accountability proceeded according to the three 'General Rules' of (1) doing no harm, (2) doing all the good one can (works of mercy), and (3) attending to the ordinances of God (works of piety). Through this means, the end of watching over one another in love was also accomplished by providing a class leader with the opportunity to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort, as the occasion required (cf. 2 Tim. 4:2). Indeed, it often took as long as two years of participation in a weekly class meeting before seekers claimed the experience of evangelical conversion.

Those 'brought to the new birth' were incorporated into 'bands' of eight to ten people, arranged by age and sex, to provide a means of 'closer union' in which they could 'confess their faults to one another, and pray for one another, that they may be healed' (cf. Jas. 5:16). This was accomplished through accountability to the same General Rules as the classes, but a more open and penetrating discourse was aimed at assisting one another grow in grace through the most besetting temptations. The bands were later diversified further to include 'penitential' bands for those who had temporarily

lost sight of God, and 'select' bands for those desiring to 'press after perfection'. Wesley expected the select bands to provide 'a pattern of love, of holiness, and of all good works' (cf. 2 Tim. 3:17), imitable by members of the whole society as examples of 'whole-life discipleship'.

### **A vision which challenges our predispositions**

I suggest that Wesley can best serve our churches and leaders as a spiritual mentor who challenges our predispositions, rather than a guru who provides us with fixed principles or guaranteed techniques for church growth. He teaches us that what the church lacks today is a vision of the end for which we strive, a vision which can call forth a whole way of life, a vision capable of inspiring the development of disciple-making practices, a vision worth staking our lives and futures upon. As a spiritual mentor, he asks us what kind of people we are called to be (or become), and what kind of community is capable of raising people like that. He reminds us that the answer to both questions can be found in the Scriptures, and that this process of discovery will involve a commitment to the long-haul adventure of costly discipleship.

Wesley calls into question our desire for off-the-shelf solutions to ministry needs, especially those technological approaches to church leadership and disciple-making that make gurus out of 'successful' pastors. Often concealed behind the visible success of churches we admire are stories of modest beginnings and endurance through real struggles to pursue a vision of authentic Christian discipleship. But the human impulse is often to subvert this wisdom into a set of simple transferable principles. Then, church marketers can merchandise those general principles as universal techniques, with all the supporting paraphernalia for applying them in different settings. Finally, we buy in to these packages, hoping to have procured the secrets of successful leadership and the keys to revitalising church life, if only we can make them work at home.

We must not turn to Wesley for general principles or universal techniques that might be procured as a technological fix to contemporary problems. Rather, we should let the history of early Methodism remind us of what is often most important about other fruitful churches and movements, namely the virtue of leadership and the vitality of

Christian community that arises only through the vagaries of striving for spiritual maturity amidst the challenges of daily life. So, in conclusion, let me suggest four pieces of spiritual advice that Wesley might offer church leaders today.

First, *immerse yourselves in the Scriptures*, the biographies of saintly leaders throughout church history, and the theological vision that nurtured and sustained them. To this end, Wesley collected and edited his own Christian Library for the Methodists. What matters is not that we merely learn these things, but that we are genuinely enthused with a compelling vision for the fullness of Christian life<sup>1</sup> and a willingness to pursue it whatever the cost. The early Methodists read about it in tracts, heard it preached in sermons, sang about it in hymns, and wrestled for it in prayer. Find other communities that are enthused about the Christian life and hang around, as Wesley did, until you have caught some of that same enthusiasm, and been inspired with vision for the possibility of something like it in your own church.

Second, *cultivate an adventurous spirit*, because what it actually means for you and your church to learn and live such a vision cannot be known in advance of the journey; and the practices needed to attain it cannot be pinned down by strategic planning. Seeking to live the Gospel in daily life, personally and as a community, is too complex and unpredictable for that. As an adventurer, the most enthusiastic thing one can do is set off in the company of friends, ready for the works of piety and mercy, trusting that the Spirit will provide the practical wisdom needed to address tactical issues along the way.

Third, *consider the use of disciplined Christian fellowship*, where members can hold each other accountable for striving to become mature disciples. As with the early Methodists, and many other renewal movements throughout church history, it is likely that such adventurous company will be found in the form of small-group fellowship, where the scriptural practices of Christian discipleship naturally flourish. What is more, the natural environment for apprenticeship in the art of sharing our faith is the context of Christian fellowship itself. As we learn how to give testimony to one another about the saving work of God in and through the struggles of everyday life, we also learn a skill that is capable of relating the Gospel to the ordinary experience of all those with whom we share our lives.

Fourth, *anticipate trouble among the troops*, because the kind of mutual dependency, intimacy and accountability required to sustain an adventure of this sort is likely to raise painful disagreement about both the means and the end. The truth is, we find ourselves holding out for a common vision and a common life among those who have been predisposed by the dominant culture to define their own private ends and choose their own personal means of accomplishing them. Struggling to discern and strive for a common vision and a common life, however, actually constitutes the very essence of our adventure; forbearing one another in love is our witness to the truth about God in an unbelieving world (Jn. 13:34-35; 17:20-21; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13).

### **Notes**

- 1 I take 'enthusiasm' in the positive sense that Wesley did, even in the Age of Reason, to mean being literally filled with God!

### **Further reading**

Henderson, D. Michael, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Evangel Publishing House, 1998)

Manskar, Steven, *A Perfect Love* (Discipleship Resources, 2003)

Meadows, Philip, 'Embodying Conversion' in Kenneth Collins and John Tyson (eds.), *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Abingdon Press, 2001)

Wesley, John, 'The Character of a Methodist' in Rupert Davies (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 9 (Abingdon Press, 1990)