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Wesleyan DNA of Discipleship



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Philip Meadows

The Wesleyan DNA of Discipleship

Fresh Expressions of Discipleship
For the 21st-century Church

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GROVE BOOKS LIMITED
RIDLEY HALL RD CAMBRIDGE CB3 9HU

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Note

All biblical references are taken from the New International Version (NIV). All references to Wesley's works are taken from Thomas Jackson (Ed), 'The Works of John Wesley,' 1872 Edition (Various Reprints), 14 Volumes and cited here as 'Works.' Short extracts from references to the Works can be found at: www.inspire-network.org.uk/grove

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First Impression May 2013
ISSN 0262-799X
ISBN 978 1 85174 865 5

1

Introduction: Family Traits

We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done.

Psalm 78.4

Biologically speaking, mapping our DNA explains what is essential to being the kind of creatures we are, while accounting for the differences between us. When we say, 'It's in her genes!' we are identifying certain qualities of appearance and behaviour that are passed from one generation to another. Within the same family we are all variations on a theme. The reproductive process tends to mix up the gene pool, making each generation different from—and yet the same as—that which went before. And the environment in which we are raised also influences how our genes are expressed, helping us adapt to our surroundings and become fit for the challenges of everyday life.

There is much contemporary discussion on the DNA of the church. How do different church traditions represent historic variations of the one Christian family? What are the distinctive family traits of those traditions or denominations? And could mapping a distinctive genetic make-up lead to fresh expressions of church that are historically rooted, but spiritually fit and healthy in a changing culture?

The 'inherited' church continues to live through a time of considerable decline. It would seem that recent generations of our denominational families have not adapted well to their changing environments, and are not fit for purpose. The current fascination with fresh expressions is an attempt to address this concern by exploring new ways of being church, many of which are quite a departure from inherited traits. It has prompted some to search for ecclesial DNA rooted in Scripture alone, unsullied by the genetic defects of competing historical traditions and fossilized institutions. This approach is good for getting at the ecumenical heart of the primitive church by highlighting family traits that all Christians might share, but it also places contemporary denominations on the horns of a dilemma.

Let me speak as a Methodist. On the one hand, if the search for ecclesial DNA means bypassing the tradition altogether, then we are no longer the 'People called Methodists' in any meaningful sense. On the other hand, if it means depending on the current state of the tradition, then we seem to be stuck with a defective gene pool. Behind this dilemma is an identity crisis about what it

means to be Methodist at all, and whether we are actually committed to the distinguishing traits of this Christian family.

Methodism is an interesting case study because it started out as a renewal movement within the Church of England during the eighteenth century. John Wesley's primary concern was not to do church differently, but to help its members live as real Christians within the church, striving for deep and authentic discipleship. The Wesleyan roots of the Methodist tradition remind us that church is first and foremost a community of disciples, seeking to be fully devoted followers of Jesus; church structures are meant to serve that great end. So, from a Methodist perspective, the search for ecclesial DNA leads us back to questions of discipleship, and the need to reconsider our traditions as genetic variations of the Jesus-shaped and Spirit-filled way of life. The revitalization of our Christian traditions will depend upon the renewal of authentic discipleship, and upon structures that help us re-express their distinctive family traits today.

The purpose of this booklet is to refocus the conversation from 'doing church differently' to 'being communities of disciples' whose historic DNA might actually make them fit for missional purpose today. What we need are fresh expressions of discipleship. Taking a closer look at the Wesleyan genome and later Methodist expressions can be instructive, not least because it involves mapping the DNA of a movement-turned-church.

As pioneer of a discipleship movement, John Wesley himself made it clear that he was not interested in doing anything new, only in renewing plain old scriptural Christianity. The Methodist historian Frank Baker said that 'Methodism' was a recurring phenomenon that exemplified the family traits of renewal movements throughout church history. Facing the tensions of a movement-turned-church, William Sangster claimed that Methodism could be 'born again' to continue its 'unfinished task'. This booklet takes up the challenge of mapping the early Methodist genome as an expression of scriptural Christianity, and examining how it has been re-expressed in various movements of discipleship that bear these distinctive family traits. We will then see what lessons might be learned as we continue to think through fresh expressions of church and discipleship in the wider church today.

Questions

- What do you understand by discipleship?
- How can we think of the church as a community of disciples?

Further Reading

J Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Methodism*, Works 13

J Wesley, Sermon 132, *On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel*, Works 7

2

Gene 1: Scriptural Holiness

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Hebrews 12.1–2

Why do the ‘People called Methodists’ matter? What is it that makes them distinctive enough to have something to offer the whole church, and the world? First of all, John Wesley claimed that God had raised up the Methodist movement ‘to reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land’ (*Minutes of Several Conversations*). Secondly, he believed that the doctrine of ‘Christian perfection’ was ‘the grand *depositum* which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised it up’ (*Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury*). In short, God had set them apart and sent them out to invite all people into a journey of faith, marked by holiness of heart and life, with the goal of perfect love.

For many, the very word ‘holiness’ is enough to strike fear into the heart. Over the years, we have done much to make it appear either unattractive or unattainable. Think of monks, saints and other spiritual elites who might appear to have had little to do with everyday life and set impossible examples to follow. Think of holier-than-thou people, who lead strict moral lives while censoring everyone around them, and who often turn out to be hypocrites. Or think of those legalistic types who measure spirituality by conformity to a list of dos and don’ts, while evacuating every drop of playfulness or enjoyment from life.

The idea of perfection does not do much for us either. On the one hand, we tend to think of it in absolute moral terms, as something reserved for the angels, or as possible for God alone. On the other hand, our technical culture has predisposed us to think of perfection in terms of flawless performance. Both divine perfection and technical perfection are quite beyond human attainment. Far from inspiring a life of virtue and excellence, such expectations of perfection are more likely to engender disillusionment, despondency and despair.

We are right to be wary of striving for perfection, but Wesley himself disavowed any such perfectionism. His language of holiness and perfection was really a way of speaking about the spiritual maturity (*teleios*, Greek, translated as *perfectio*, Latin) we are called towards throughout Scripture and by the

ancient traditions of the church (eg Matt 5.48; 2 Cor 7.1; Eph 4.13; Phil 3.12; Col 1.28; 1 John 4.18). From the Anglican Pietists he learned that holiness was a heart fully devoted to God, expressed in a life of loving obedience. From the French Mystics he learned that holiness was the fruit of an intimate and conscious communion with God that takes flesh in costly service to others. From the German Moravians he learned that the pursuit of holiness is by faith and grace alone, begun in the experience of new birth and the personal assurance of forgiveness.

The simple aim of Wesley's teaching was to captivate our imaginations with a scripturally rooted vision of Jesus-shaped and Spirit-inspired discipleship. We are to aim at nothing less than hearts and lives that are filled, transformed and overflowing with holy love of God and neighbour. On the one hand, scriptural holiness is about practising the presence of God in all the circumstances of daily life, as one who 'exercises his love to God, by praying without ceasing, rejoicing evermore, and in everything giving thanks' (cf 1 Thess 5.16–18). On the other hand, love for God is expressed in uncompromising love for neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This goal of perfect love is to be pursued as both a command and a promise. It is a way of life that we are to seek, because it is something that God longs to give. A Methodist is not one who has necessarily attained the goal, but one who hungers for it and strives after it.

The pursuit for scriptural holiness is driven by a longing for a life made beautiful by the indwelling presence and power of God. This 'beauty of holiness' is seen in the life of Jesus, and discipleship is about becoming more like him in all our thinking, feeling, speaking and doing. When those who live without God come into contact with a people whose lives are radiant with divine beauty, the truth of the gospel is not only credible but attractive and compelling. If we have lost our passion for the Christian life, it may be that we do not have an adequate vision to inspire it.

Questions

- What do you long for in the Christian life?
- Why do we need to have a vision for the goal of our discipleship?

Further Reading

J Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist*, Works 8

J Wesley, Sermon 40, *On Christian Perfection*, Works 6

3

Gene 2: Spiritual Discipline

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Philippians 2.12–13

When our imaginations are captivated by a vision of scriptural holiness, and our hearts begin to hunger and thirst for it, we are naturally led to ask, 'How do we embark on this spiritual journey, and seek this way of life? How do we grow in grace, faith and holy love?' Wesley encouraged the early Methodists to strive for scriptural holiness through the spiritual disciplines, which he calls 'means of grace,' because they keep us connected to God's life-transforming presence and power.

By means of grace we become recipients of what Wesley calls the two 'grand branches' of salvation. On the one hand, grace is everything that God has done for us in Christ to forgive our sins and bring us into right relationship with the Father (justifying grace). On the other hand, grace is everything that God does in us through the Spirit, to give us new birth, set us free from the power of sin and conform our lives to the likeness of Christ (sanctifying grace). If it is by grace that God reaches out to embrace us, then it is by faith that we reach out to receive it. Conversion is entering into this life-transforming relationship with God, and discipleship is deepening our communion with God in daily life.

It is through the spiritual disciplines that we take hold of God by faith, and he takes hold of us by grace. These include 'works of piety,' such as prayer, searching the Scriptures, participating in the Lord's Supper, and fasting or abstinence. As a means of grace, prayer is more than mere petition but the breath of our spiritual life, the vital means of communion with God. Searching the Scriptures is more than mere Bible study but entering into a life-giving conversation with God, whose word of command and promise has the power to change our lives. Participating in the Lord's Supper is more than mere remembrance, but how we renew our relationship with God and surrender our lives into his hands. Fasting is more than mere determination to give up bad habits, but the way we recentre our lives on God, because only God can satisfy our souls.

Wesley also extended this spiritual understanding to include ‘works of mercy’ as means of grace. These include care for the body, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned; and care for the soul, such as ‘awakening sinners’ and ‘contributing in any manner to the saving of souls.’ The early Methodists thought of evangelism as a work of mercy. Works of mercy are the means by which God works in, with and through us to meet the needs of others.

There is an inseparable connection between works of piety and works of mercy in the life of discipleship. In one sense, love of God is cultivated primarily through works of piety and love of neighbour is expressed primarily through works of mercy. Drawing close to the heart of God will inevitably send us out in mission to meet the needs of others, because God’s heart is to heal the sick and save the lost. When our works of piety lead to works of mercy we are caught up in a movement of divine grace that fills, transforms and overflows our own hearts and lives. God embraces us, and then embraces others through us.

Wesley makes it clear that the means of grace are not optional extras but vitally necessary for our spiritual growth, and for keeping the growth that we have received. The spiritual disciplines are disciplines because we must do them! But they are only spiritual when they connect us to the presence of God, and keep us open to the power of the Spirit. Discipline without Spirit descends into mere legalism. Spirit without discipline descends into mere emotivism.

A life filled with the means of grace is a form of holistic discipleship that mirrors the life of Jesus himself. We share his life of piety that seeks to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. And we share his life of mercy that seeks to love our neighbours, body and soul, in word and deed. Discipleship as a life of piety and mercy is what it means to participate in the mission of God, and to be sent as Jesus was sent. Through the spiritual disciplines we stay connected to grace, and find ourselves increasingly attentive to God’s presence and responsive to his leading.

Questions

- How do you stay connected to God’s love and grace?
- What are the roles of piety and mercy in our growth as disciples?

Further Reading

J Wesley, Sermon 16, *The Means of Grace*, Works 8

J Wesley, Sermon 85, *On Working Out Our Own Salvation*, Works 6

4

Gene 3: Accountable Fellowship

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.

Hebrews 10.24–25

Wesley said that ‘as the sun is the centre of the solar system, so...God is the centre of spirits,’ but that ‘we are encompassed on all sides with persons and things that tend to draw us from our centre’ (Sermon, *On Dissipation*). He understood how the rigours of daily life cause us to become ‘uncentred’ or ‘unhinged from God,’ and ‘habitually inattentive’ to his presence and leading. Scriptural holiness is a God-centred life. It is through the spiritual disciplines that we become attentive to the voice of Jesus, and responsive to the impulses of his Spirit. But how do we remain faithful to these means of grace and obedient to God’s leading in daily life?

For Wesley, the deepest and most important function of Christian fellowship is to keep us recentred on God and improve our spiritual discipline, so we may become more fully devoted followers of Jesus. The early Methodists knew that they could not become holy on their own. Wesley taught them that there was no such thing as ‘solitary Christianity,’ and that the core purpose of Methodist society was ‘watching over one another in love’ (*cf* Heb 13.17), so they might ‘help each other to work out their salvation’ (*cf* Phil 2.12). Wesley was convinced that the pursuit of holiness would fail apart from the support of spiritual friends who share the journey of discipleship together.

The New Testament letters to the various churches frequently use the expression ‘one another’ to describe the nature of Christian fellowship. First, there are those verses that relate to *worship and ministry*, such as ‘speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs’ (Eph 5.19), ‘teach and admonish one another with all wisdom’ (Col 3.16) and ‘pray for all the saints’ (Eph 6.18). Secondly, those that relate to *service and pastoral care*, such as ‘serve one another’ (Gal 5.13), ‘carry each one other’s burdens’ (Gal 6.2) and ‘encourage one another’ (1 Thess 5.11). Finally, those that relate to *mutual accountability and spiritual direction*, such as, ‘speak the truth’ in love to one another (Eph 4.15), ‘confess your sins to each other’ (James 5.16) and ‘spur one another on towards love and good deeds’ (Heb 10.24). This full range of ‘one-anothering’ is what Wesley meant by ‘social holiness.’

Local churches are typically quite intentional about worship, ministry, service and pastoral care. The missing dimension, however, tends to be mutual accountability (sharing life deeply with one another) and spiritual direction (helping one another discern the presence and leading of God). Yet this was the essence of early Methodist fellowship. The societies were subdivided into small groups of up to twelve people, called ‘class meetings,’ who held one another accountable to three simple rules: (1) do no harm; (2) do all the good one can (works of mercy); and (3) attend to the ordinances of God (works of piety). These groups had a class leader who would be the first to share, and then take the opportunity to ‘advise, reprove, comfort or exhort, as the occasion required.’ The class meeting is reminiscent of the way Jesus gathered and apprenticed the twelve disciples.

Those who hungered for greater spiritual maturity were also gathered into even smaller groups of four or more, called ‘bands,’ arranged by age and sex. This enabled a closer union by which they could have more open confession and penetrating conversation. The aim was to help one another grow in grace through the most besetting challenges, and to wrestle with God for the promise of perfect love. Wesley hoped the bands would provide ‘a pattern of love, of holiness, and of all good works,’ and develop spiritual mentors and leaders of the movement. This is reminiscent of the way Jesus chose to invest in a band of three from among the twelve—Peter, James and John—to share the deepest moments of his own life.

Emphasizing accountability will seem like a curse to those who are content with their own private spirituality, or who expect little from the Christian life. People are right to be wary of accountability in the spiritual life if it is associated with forms of evaluation, reward and punishment, rather than sharing, healing and growth. The best way to understand accountability is in the context of spiritual direction, with the goal of helping one another become more attentive to the presence of God, and more responsive to the leading of the Spirit. The challenge of accountable discipleship is grasped as a blessing, albeit with ‘fear and trembling,’ by those who long for more of God and desire to fulfil his missional purposes in their lives.

Questions

- How do you invest in spiritual friendship?
- Why is accountability and spiritual direction important for discipleship?

Further Reading

J Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, Works 11
J Wesley, Preface, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1739), Works 14

5

Gene 4: Transformative Worship

Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.

Ephesians 5.18–19

What kind of worship befits a people who are seeking holiness of heart and life? First, it is worship that celebrates the truth of God, whose ‘nature and name is love,’ and whose love embraces us with the gift of salvation (Charles Wesley, Hymn, *Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown*). Secondly, it is worship that connects us with the grace of God, who changes our hearts and renews our lives. To worship God in spirit and in truth is to discover that the God we adore really inhabits the praises of his people. Where two or more are gathered in his name, Jesus is present to forgive our sins, and his Spirit is at work to renew and empower us. When worship becomes a means of grace, the promises of the gospel are not merely remembered, but lives are transformed at the same time.

Singing hymns, sharing testimony and personal commitment were regular features of early Methodist gatherings, from the preaching services for the whole society, to the small group meetings of classes and bands. Transformative worship and accountable fellowship went hand in hand on the journey of discipleship. If spiritual discipline emphasizes the need for accountability, then worship acknowledges our need for the life-transforming presence and power of God as the means and end of our journey.

Most contemporary hymn books are arranged according to some kind of systematic theology, and John Wesley certainly believed we were to ‘sing the faith.’ In his preface to the *Collection of Hymns* (1780), however, he notes that the hymns, written mostly by his brother Charles, were ‘carefully ranged...according to the experience of real Christians.’ In other words, to sing your way through that hymn book would take you on the journey of discipleship: from turning to God, through the forgiveness of sins, the gift of new birth, the ups and downs of spiritual life, towards the final victory of perfect love and the hope of heaven.

These hymns often have us travelling on the Emmaus road, in the company of Jesus, whom we struggle to see, but whose word enchants our souls and instils a restless longing for more. Or we become like Jacob wrestling with the ‘angel’ at Jabbok and plead with God in prayer for the promises of the gospel to be fulfilled (Gen 32.22f). Or like Moses coming down the mountain, but with un-

veiled faces, being changed from glory into glory (2 Cor 3.18). 'Above all,' says Wesley, 'sing spiritually...Have an eye to God in every word you sing,' and a heart that is 'offered to God continually' (*Directions for Singing*). What matters more than the 'spirit of poetry' in any hymn, is the 'spirit of piety' with which it is sung. Every true seeker sings 'as a means of raising or quickening the spirit of devotion; of confirming his faith; of enlivening his hope; and of kindling and increasing his love to God and man' (Preface, *Collection of Hymns*).

The love-feast was a time of shared testimony for people of every age, sex and walk of life to sing and speak of God's grace. On these occasions, Wesley often noted how 'God poured out his Spirit abundantly,' and how 'the power of God fell upon all that were present.' These festivals of divine love were filled with shouts of praise, tears of joy and fervent prayer. Many experienced the forgiveness of sins, deliverance from fear, comfort for grief and the increase of faith. Others found the power of holy love could set their hearts free from the grip of worldliness and sin. Wesley also notes how 'the flame ran from heart to heart,' as the testimony of one ordinary person became a promise of God's grace to another.

Transformative worship can be wildly noisy or wonderfully solemn. A year in the life of a Methodist society might begin by 'renewing, with one heart and one voice, their covenant with God,' and end with a watch-night of fasting and prayer. The Covenant Service provided an opportunity for personal commitment on the journey of discipleship, while the watch-night was an opportunity to give thanks for the year past, and to pray for the year ahead. Again, Wesley delights to note that covenant renewal was an occasion when 'the windows of heaven were open,' when God 'did appear in the midst of the congregation,' when 'the Spirit of glory...as usual, rested upon them.' In the presence of God, and filled with the Spirit, they freely surrendered their lives to Christ, and were resolved to follow as mission-shaped disciples.

Questions

- When have you found worship to be a transforming encounter with God?
- How can worship be a celebration of, and empowerment for, everyday discipleship?

Further Reading

J Wesley, Preface, *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists* (1780), Works 14

J Wesley, *Directions for Renewing Our Covenant with God* (London: The Foundry, 1781)

6

Gene 5: Personal Service

Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!

Matthew 25.21

Scriptural holiness, spiritual discipline, accountable fellowship and transformative worship all contribute to the God-centred life. But how does this personal spirituality empower a commitment to mission? Wesley argues that real Christians are also called to be 'good stewards,' fully surrendered to God's will for their lives. A good steward is one who knows that life is not given for us to do as we please, but to do what pleases God so that his kingdom purposes may be fulfilled. Life is a gift from God, not to be owned and possessed, but to be enjoyed in the process of giving it back to God through the service of others in works of mercy. Fullness of life does not come from keeping ourselves to ourselves, but from giving our lives to others. In the end, being selfish and stingy does not satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts.

Wesley's simple message is that you are not your own... You belong to God! You have a soul, made in the image of God, with powers of understanding and imagination, desires and aversions, hopes and fears... You have a body, with many capacities to bless others... You have all kinds of worldly goods, from the necessities that make life possible to the conveniences that make it enjoyable... You have abilities to earn and save money, whether much or little... You have all manner of other advantages in varying degrees, like health and strength, time and talents, education and learning... They all belong to God!

In a selfish culture, turning from ownership to stewardship takes a kind of repentance, in which we turn away from self-centredness to become God-centred in every part of our lives. We see this commitment in Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed, 'Not my will, but yours be done'; and this is also how he taught the disciples to pray (Luke 22.42). 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' (Luke 9.23). Only a good steward can commit every past achievement, every present opportunity and every future aspiration into the hands of God.

It takes a good steward, with a missionary heart, to say the covenant prayer, 'I am no longer my own, but yours' and 'I freely and wholeheartedly yield all

things to your pleasure and disposal.’ Charles Wesley sang, ‘O for a heart to please my God, a heart from sin set free!’ And John Wesley prayed, ‘To thee, O God...I give up myself entirely: May I no longer serve myself, but thee, all the days of my life...Be thou the sole disposer and governor of myself and all; be thou my portion and my all’ (*Forms of Prayer*, Thursday evening). This kind of surrender is at the heart of all effective missionary activity: ‘Here I am, Lord, send me!’ God sends us to serve our families, friends, and neighbours. And God brings others into our realm of influence on a daily basis, often in unexpected ways. We are never short of opportunities to serve others; the only question is whether we will surrender to the impulses of the Spirit when they arise.

Actually, Wesley goes so far as to say that we must serve or die! When we do not serve as the Spirit leads, our spiritual life gradually withers away. Self-centredness not only cheats our neighbour of what God intended, but it kills the very life of God in our soul. This is why we cannot visit the sick or serve the needy by proxy! Salving our conscience by charitable giving can deprive us of a means of grace, and deprive others of the personal service and witness that we are meant to offer.

Nor can we make serving God in works of piety an excuse for neglecting our neighbour in works of mercy. We must not be so occupied with religious duty that we miss the point of it all. If it comes to a choice, we are to exercise our love of neighbour as a matter of priority! We must be ready to leave our sanctuaries of private devotion and public worship ‘at love’s almighty call.’ Why? Because that is how we finally demonstrate the authenticity of our love for God, who loves our neighbour as ourselves and seeks to embrace them through our service.

Questions

- What challenges do you face in being a good steward?
- Why is surrender an important aspect of mission-shaped discipleship?

Further Reading

J Wesley, Sermon 51, *The Good Steward*, Works 6
J Wesley, Sermon 98, *On Visiting the Sick*, Works 7
J Wesley, Sermon 92, *On Zeal*, Works 7

7

Gene 6: Evangelistic Witness

Become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.

Philippians 2.15–16

For Wesley, the gospel we are called to spread is the good news of scriptural holiness, and the promise that we can be perfected in love. The question is, 'How do we bring the gospel to others? How do we invite others to join this journey of discipleship?'

It has become common to summarize Wesley's gospel message of salvation as the 'Four Alls' of Methodism: (1) *All must be saved*. We have all exchanged the life of God for self-centred lives of our own making. Salvation is rooted in what Christ has done for us to renew our relationship with God, and what the Spirit does in us to heal our hearts and transform our lives. (2) *All can be saved*. Wesley argued that the Spirit is already and always at work in the hearts of every human being, implanting a restless desire after God and drawing them to Jesus. It is by this 'prevenient grace' that God first seeks us so that we might seek him. (3) *All can know they are saved*. Entering into a new and transforming relationship with God is also an experiential reality. The Spirit of adoption cries out within us, 'Abba! Father,' brings us assurance of forgiveness, and implants a practical love for our neighbours (Rom 8.15). (4) *All can be saved to the uttermost*. God finishes what he starts. The meaning of salvation is not merely the forgiveness of sins and the promise of heaven, but a life that is saved from the guilt and the power of sin, and changed from glory to glory into the likeness of Christ.

Wesley believed that this was the message all human beings were created to hear, but he was troubled by the fact that so many people remained unaffected by it. He was convinced that the problem had nothing to do with the gospel, or our methods of proclamation. He had lived through a time of revival, when preachers took the message outside into the fields, onto street corners, and from house to house. Rather, Wesley concluded that 'the grand stumbling-block' to the spread of the gospel is 'the lives of Christians'! He believed that the generality of those who call themselves disciples are not actually living proof of the gospel. The real problem is when Christians lack the 'power of

religion' in their hearts, and fail to embody the beauty of holiness in their lives (2 Tim 3.5).

The gospel is not just a message we bring, but a life that we live; the medium is the message. We have a gospel of holy love, and it takes a holy people to communicate that message effectively. God's chosen medium is the witness of ordinary people whose lives are made extraordinary by the love of God and neighbour. Israel was called to be a holy people, a light to the nations. When they were in danger of forgetting this, Jesus came among them as the light of the world, and passed this calling on to his disciples, whose lives were to shine like stars in the darkness.

In early Methodism, this light shone through the words of preacher-evangelists in the fields, through hymns of praise in society meetings, through testimonies of transformation at love-feasts, and through those who surrendered their lives to God in covenant services. This light shone through good stewardship and works of mercy, as they fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited the sick and imprisoned. As this light dawned upon the lives of sinners, they were awakened to the need of salvation and joined a class meeting to seek God for themselves. In the classes, believers pursued holiness alongside seekers pursuing conversion, as fellow disciples longing for more of God. It could take up to two years of participation in a Methodist society for seekers to experience the new birth. Belonging before believing!

Early Methodist discipleship is an example of mission spirituality. A life that is deeply rooted in the love of God is also sent out in love for neighbour. We become *recipients* of God's mission, as those who know his saving love, filling and transforming our own lives. And we become *participants* in God's mission, as those who share this love and life, to help others connect personally with his saving grace. This is the spirituality of mission-shaped disciples who live the gospel in word and deed. 'In general,' says Wesley, 'the kingdom of God...will silently increase, wherever it is set up, and spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town.'

Questions

- How can our lives become a stumbling block to the gospel?
- In what sense does discipleship mean 'living the gospel'?

Further Reading

J Wesley, Sermon 24, *Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, Discourse IV, Works 5

J Wesley, Sermon 63, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, Works 6

8

Expression 1: Holiness Movements

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord [and] the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Philippians 3.8–12

Wesley frequently draws on this text when speaking about discipleship as the pursuit of holiness. Jesus calls us to it, Paul longs for it, and Wesley urges us to settle for nothing less. The Wesleyan genome has been re-expressed by a recurring passion for holy living and a renewed interest in the goal of perfect love. This passion for holiness has emerged in a number of movements through the twentieth century, each emphasizing a different aspect of Paul's longing.

The Holiness Movement has transatlantic roots, and developed a Pentecostal approach to the pursuit of holiness, longing to know 'the power of his resurrection.' Adherents had a form of revival spirituality and sought an instantaneous baptism of the Spirit after conversion, which would overcome the power of sin with the power of holy love. This was an experience of 'entire sanctification' or 'full salvation' that could empower a life of costly discipleship, personal service and evangelistic witness. Over the years, Cliff College has been a centre for the Holiness Movement in Britain. Samuel Chadwick (1860–1932), an early principal at the college, promoted this vision of holy living through evangelistic campaigns, Franciscan-style trek-cart ministry in rural villages and camp-meeting-style convention meetings on the college site. Chadwick wrote an influential book, *The Way to Pentecost*, and was involved with the Pentecostal League of Prayer and the development of the Southport Holiness Convention.

Members of the more mainline Fellowship of the Kingdom (now Spectrum) approached the pursuit of holiness through the example of Jesus' life, longing to know the righteousness which is by faith in Christ. They challenged the worldliness creeping into the church through its engagement with secular society by recovering the calling to be a movement of 'ordinary saints.' A notable member of the Fellowship was William Sangster (1900–1960), a

minister of Westminster Central Hall and Director of Home Missions. He wrote books addressing spiritual compromise in the denomination, with titles such as *Methodism Can be Born Again* and *Methodism's Unfinished Task*, which is the spreading of scriptural holiness. In many ways, this movement sought to renew the traditional charisms of Wesleyan and early Methodist spirituality.

The School of Fellowship tended to approach the pursuit of holiness through an emphasis on the cross, longing for a 'sharing in his sufferings.' This was, in part, a liberal reaction to the evangelical revivalism of the Holiness Movement, and the more traditional expressions of Wesleyan heritage found in the Fellowship of the Kingdom. They emphasized the way that God's power is displayed through weakness and suffering service, and advocated a form of discipleship that identifies with the poor and outcast in society. Robert Newton Flew (1886–1962), a Principal of Wesley House in Cambridge, was a prominent member of the School, and author of *Jesus and His Way*. The movement promoted its cause through regular conferences at the Swanwick convention centre.

All three persons noted above sought to retrieve and restate Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection. Chadwick sought perfection in the 'second blessing' of entire sanctification. Sangster defended the possibility of growing towards perfect love in an imperfect world. And Flew presented Wesley's thinking as an 'ideal for the present life,' sought through a moment-by-moment dependence on divine grace. Whatever the expression, this passion for scriptural holiness comes from a longing for more of Christ and a holy dissatisfaction with lukewarm life. It brings a new hunger for the spiritual disciplines and a commitment to accountable fellowship through which we become mission-shaped disciples.

Questions

- What kind of longing for God most appeals to you?
- How might 'holy dissatisfaction' become a motivation for discipleship?

Further Reading

S Chadwick, *Call to Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1936)

W Sangster, *The Path to Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1943)

R Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934)

9

Expression 2: Revival Spirituality

Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your unfailing love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.

Psalm 85.6–7

Wesley taught the early Methodists to expect a gradual growth in grace and holiness through a commitment to spiritual discipline, accountable fellowship, transformative worship, personal service and evangelistic witness. In doing so they were to seek the ordinary work of the Spirit as *an abiding, strengthening and renewing presence*. They opened themselves to an everyday relationship with the Spirit who shelters and nurtures, equips and empowers, guides and leads, woos and inspires us. So scriptural holiness means keeping in step with the Spirit, and bearing the fruit of the Spirit, so that we may become more like Jesus in daily life.

But the early Methodists also encountered the Spirit as an *inbreaking, converting and revolutionary power* that can change hearts and lives in a moment. The life of the Spirit not only wells up within us, but is poured out upon us, causing our walk with God to advance in leaps and bounds. In the pursuit of holiness the Methodists would wait on God, and wrestle with him for the miraculous and instantaneous gifts of new birth, the assurance of sins forgiven and the fullness of perfection in love. Revival spirituality is about longing for this extraordinary work of the Spirit and seeking it passionately through every aspect of discipleship.

Revival spirituality is also a way of addressing both the spirit of worldliness that robs persons and churches of their passion for holiness and derails us from our journey of discipleship. Worldliness is like a power that grips us through the formation of sinful habits of heart and life, sometimes by choice but often by default. It can sneak upon us by stealth as we slip into worldly ways by slow and imperceptible degrees. Movements of revival remind us that we need to encounter the Spirit as both comforter and disturber. Very often, the only way to break the power of sin and reignite a passion for holiness is through a 'power encounter' with the Spirit that revives our 'first love' (Rev 2.4).

Wesley was labelled an 'enthusiast' because he encouraged what respectable people considered an irrational pursuit of spiritual experience. But he knew that the Spirit who clothes us in a right mind can fill us with a holy intoxication!

There was no contradiction in early Methodism between a disciplined sacramental lifestyle, and the manifestation of charismatic gifts, speaking in tongues, dancing for joy and falling to the ground. Radical discipleship often requires us to submit natural reason to the supernatural ways of God.

Early Methodism was born in the soil of a great revival that swept across Britain in the eighteenth century. There was a renewed confidence in the gospel and a spiritual expectancy that lives would be changed, from field preaching to class meetings, and love-feasts to society worship. It was also a transatlantic phenomenon that inspired pioneers on the American frontier, and eventually developed into the first camp meetings. This kind of gathering was introduced to Britain through the Primitive Methodists, beginning with the ministry of Hugh Bourne on Mow Cop (1807). Many kinds of revival-style meetings continue in evangelical Christianity today, both under canvas and in other venues.

Revival spirituality has placed an emphasis on the way that corporate prayer and worship can be a means of grace for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit, leading to the conversion of seekers and the renewal of believers. In his lectures on revival, Charles Finney (1792–1875) systematized the pattern for revival meetings, which move from impassioned singing to evangelical preaching and altar calls. Revivalists have also extended this style in the form of protracted meetings over several days of intense preaching, prayer, and singing. In Britain, the Methodist Revival Fellowship (founded in 1952) and then the Headway movement (1980s) were founded to promote the cause of revival. This legacy is now gathered into the network of Methodist Evangelicals Together (founded in 2007).

The hallmarks of revival spirituality include a hunger for God, renewal of spiritual discipline, serious repentance, openness to the Spirit and a solemn dedication to follow Jesus in holiness of heart and life. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of prayer meetings for revival, and this has often injected new life to the whole Methodist genome, for individuals and churches. The transforming power of the Spirit is centred in the hearts and lives of individual disciples, but its circumference extends throughout the church, and into the world. The ripple effects of revival have resulted in movements of social caring and evangelistic mission through the Spirit-filled work and witness of holy lives.

Questions

- How do we experience the Spirit as both an abiding and inbreaking power?
- Why is enthusiasm a hallmark of Spirit-filled discipleship?

Further Reading

H Bourne, *A Collection of Hymns for Camp Meeting, Revival etc* (Primitive Methodist Connexion, 1821)

W Arthur, *The Tongue of Fire* (New York: Harper, 1856)

10

Expression 3: Social Responsibility

It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you.

Galatians 4.18

As noted earlier, Wesley claimed that there is ‘no holiness, but social holiness’ (Sermon, *Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, IV*). Furthermore, ‘Christianity is essentially a social religion...and to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed to destroy it!’ What is more, he contends that ‘a secret, unobserved religion cannot be the religion of Jesus Christ.’ The test of real Christianity, and the integrity of the Methodist genome, is whether it visibly transforms the relationships we have with others, whether at church, at home or in the world.

Real holiness is not about leaving the world and retreating to our own private spirituality, but living in the world as a public witness to the gospel. Without such a witness, we are either lacking in the grace of God, or the grace we have received becomes good for nothing: a light that is put out, or salt that is thrown out. Wesley said, ‘Let the light which is in your heart shine in all good works, both works of piety and works of mercy.’ We are to exercise our love for neighbour by caring for all those whom God brings into our sphere of influence. ‘This is the great reason why the providence of God has so mingled you together with other men, that whatever grace you have received of God may through you be communicated to others.’

In early Methodism, ‘social holiness’ began in small groups who helped one another grow in grace and love for God and neighbour. This love was then to shine within a Methodist society by doing good to others in the community of faith, especially the poor. Finally, holy love was to shine forth in wider society through the missionary activities of evangelism and service. In short, social holiness refers to the love of God rooted in the heart of every person and overflowing in ever-widening circles; from small groups, through the community of faith, and out into the world.

Although Wesley did not directly promote a concern for social justice as such, he certainly modelled it by way of personal example. In addition to publicly critiquing the problem of slavery, Wesley also challenged a number of other social and economic evils of his time. For example, he addressed petty crime like smuggling as a form of theft that caused a general increase in taxes (*A*

Word to a Smuggler). He also deconstructed the popular ‘myth of scarcity’ by showing how the inflated cost of staple provisions like bread was caused by ruthless distillers turning grain into cheap gin, and by rich landowners using agricultural areas for raising horses rather than cultivating wheat (*The Present Scarcity of Provisions*). In each case, he protested against the way in which these all contributed to the plight of the poor.

Social responsibility in early Methodism took the form of evangelical zeal harnessed to a passion for social outreach. In addition to visiting the sick, Methodists founded medical dispensaries, almshouses, orphanages and other charities. They also joined in wider movements of social responsibility such as the Temperance Movement, the development of Sunday schools, and agencies dedicated to relieving the problems of poverty, such as the Strangers’ Friend Society.

This spirituality was exemplified by Hugh Price Hughes (1847–1902), who related Christian faith to wider society through the development of the ‘non-conformist conscience,’ which was a fusion of the Holiness Movement with radical discipleship. He was a co-founder of the National Council of Free Churches, whose aims were tackling social evils like alcoholism, gambling and violence, and deepening the spiritual life of the churches as the source and goal of this work. Hughes was also a founder of the Forward Movement, which planted about forty city missions, or centres of evangelistic and social outreach in the most deprived areas of inner-city life.

Donald Soper (1903–1998) became a leading exponent of ‘social evangelism,’ taking up political action as a means for holding government accountable to the gospel. He was theologically liberal and politically socialist, but he became famous for his tireless open-air preaching at Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park, London. Soper was co-founder of the Order of Christian Witness, which held campaigns in urban centres, often concluding with a call to the cause of radical discipleship.

Wesley urges us to be ‘social, open active Christians’ who do not ‘conceal this light, wherewith God has enlightened your soul’ but ‘let it shine still more eminently in your actions, in your doing all possible good to all men; and in your suffering for righteousness’ sake.’

Questions

- How are we tempted to live a ‘secret, unobserved religion’?
- Why do evangelical zeal and social outreach belong together in discipleship?

Further Reading

HP Hughes, *Social Christianity* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889)

D Soper, *Calling for Action* (London: Robson, 1984)

11

Expression 4: World Mission

Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.

Mark 16.15

Methodist missionaries from Britain, America and Europe have taken the gospel all around the world at great personal cost. Those who survived the journey many died within a short time of arriving, and many more were permanently weakened by life-threatening diseases. They went through often unimaginable suffering and great personal tragedy, and yet their testimonies speak of great confidence in the gospel, with little by way of disappointment or regret. The pioneering spirit that combined evangelical zeal with social responsibility at home was expanded to ministry overseas, as an adaptation of Wesley's own missionary instinct: 'I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean...to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation' (*Journal*, 1739).

From the earliest times Methodist men and women have shared this missionary impulse to communicate the gospel they have received, and to make disciples who share the blessings of this spiritual movement. This can be seen in the decisions to send preacher-missionaries to Ireland, Scotland and Shetland. And by 1769, they were sending missionaries to support the growth of Methodism in America. The story of world mission in Methodism usually begins, however, with the journey of Thomas Coke in 1786, who was driven off course from his trip to Canada and landed at Antigua in the West Indies. Between 1811 and 1814 Coke also initiated missions to West Africa and Ceylon. In general, missionary activity tended to follow routes carved out by migrants, traders, soldiers, sailors and other colonial powers. By 1837, British Methodist missions had also reached Canada, South and West Africa, South India and Australia. And, by the 1880s, less than 150 years after Wesley's missionary heart was fired up at Aldersgate, Methodists had a foothold in most countries around the world.

Methodism spread overseas in much the same way as it did at home: through the mobilization of laity, the activity of itinerant preachers and the organization of societies. The methods often combined revival spirituality with local partnership in the establishment of schools and hospitals, together with the

advancement of agricultural and industrial techniques. It was a very holistic approach to evangelism and mission.

As Methodism became more respectable in the nineteenth century, missionaries came from the margins of the institutional church, especially women and those from low social standing. The sending and supporting of missionaries developed organically in the circuits and among district auxiliary groups. These groups were formally incorporated into the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) in 1818, under the leadership of Richard Watson and Jabez Bunting. The advantages of institutional organization and financial control, however, brought a long-term dissipation of spontaneous missionary zeal.

From our twenty-first-century vantage point, there is little doubt that the missionary enterprise was a mixed blessing, often confusing evangelization with civilization, and the imposition of enlightened Western values on local indigenous cultures. Intentionally or unintentionally, missionaries have been implicated in the spread of Western imperialism and colonialism. When one meets with Methodists from around the world, however, it is clear they have a deep appreciation for those missionaries who came to love them, and often laid down their lives so that they might encounter the gospel. Many missionaries may have started out with deficient views of indigenous people, but they were quick to learn; and some became great ethnographers, whose work helped to deepen an ongoing understanding of other languages and cultures.

The biographies of Methodist missionaries display a confidence in the gospel of personal salvation, the life-transforming power of the Spirit and the promise of perfect love. These early Methodist genes were transmitted through nineteenth-century Holiness Movements into contemporary Pentecostalism—which is perhaps the most widespread and vibrant form of Christianity in the world church. Methodism in the West is now welcoming missionaries from those countries that were originally evangelized, as well as the challenge of their vibrant and indigenous expressions of a common Methodist genetic makeup.

Questions

- What would it mean to say ‘the world is my parish’ today?
- What is the relationship between world mission and everyday discipleship?

Further Reading

J Vickers, *The Journals of Dr Thomas Coke* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005)

D Whiteman and G Anderson, *World Mission in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 2009)

Conclusion: Fresh Expressions

12

Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.

Matthew 13.52

Before I can finish the sentence, ‘fresh expressions of...’ someone will say, ‘messy church,’ or ‘café church,’ or some other way of ‘being and doing church!’ The language of fresh expressions tends to be identified with revamping Christian community to make it more attractive, or developing social projects aimed at gathering the unchurched into new communities around culturally relevant activities. Either way, we can still be tempted to evaluate the success of such initiatives on consumerist terms: how many people are attending our new service or community activity? Did they have a good experience? Will they come back? While this is true, I am concerned that we may be starting in the wrong place, or perhaps asking the wrong kind of questions about the church.

The ultimate question is this: are we seeking to be, make and grow disciples of Jesus Christ? Is this the motivation for our gathering, and the goal of all our striving? Or are we in danger of merely reproducing new kinds of nominal Christianity when the world is looking for reality and authenticity? It is vital that we discover fresh expressions of discipleship if we are to avoid more stale expressions of church!

Throughout this book, I have been exploring a shift of focus from ‘doing church’ to ‘being disciples’ by examining the Wesleyan DNA of Methodist discipleship. On the one hand, these can be thought of as the shared genes of scriptural Christianity, leading to a Jesus-shaped and Spirit-filled way of life. On the other hand, we have seen how they have been taken up and expressed with some distinctively Methodist family traits.

Mapping this DNA underscores the importance of shifting the focus of our attention from developing more attractive community gatherings, or more culturally relevant outreach, to a much more basic question. Are we becoming more like Jesus, walking deeply with God, in the power of the Spirit, through daily life? Our meetings and events, projects and programmes, will only

have the power to make disciples if they are expressions of a people who are themselves committed to the life of discipleship.

What kind of life do we have to offer if our vision is not captivated by the gospel of scriptural holiness and our lives are not immersed in the spiritual disciplines? What kind of community do we invite people to join if it is not shaped by the mutual support and transforming worship of fellow travellers on the journey into God? What kind of service do we engage in, and what kind of faith do we share, if we are to make the gospel visible in our actions and audible in our words? To begin with, this mission-shaped discipleship causes us to rethink a number of vital areas of church life and mission.

First, when we think about spirituality, our attention is refocused from the realm of private experience and inward journeys to a way of life that makes God visible in the world. True spirituality is a life-transforming relationship with God that takes flesh in costly discipleship at home, work and church. It is a light that shines as we love our neighbour in all kinds of service and witness.

Secondly, when we think about mission, our attention is refocused from evangelistic programmes and service projects to the lives of ordinary people filled, transformed and overflowing with the love of God and neighbour in everyday life. The kingdom is advanced, and Christian community planted, when the presence and power of the Spirit is at work in the hearts of Christian disciples who enter into life-transforming relationships with others.

Thirdly, when we think about worship, our attention is refocused from weekly services and special events to everyday celebrations of God's reign over our lives, relationships and circumstances. Gathering for worship should be a time of thanks and praise for the works God has done among us, as well as a transformative encounter with the Spirit who sends us out again.

Fourthly, when we think about church leadership, our attention is refocused from institutional maintenance to developing a culture in which discipleship can emerge. But it does require a shift from just feeding the sheep to making them hungry for holiness; from just doing ministry to equipping the saints with spiritual discipline; from just attracting crowds to investing in accountable fellowship; and from just making strategies to opening people's eyes. Jesus said, 'Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest' (John 4.35). The best hope for a mission-shaped church is that we become mission-shaped disciples.

Questions

- Why is personal spirituality so important for evangelistic mission?
- How might your church develop fresh expressions of discipleship?

Discipleship within early Methodism had mission spirituality at the core of its DNA. In a world desperate for reality and authenticity, fresh expressions of true Christian discipleship are needed now more than ever.

This booklet is a thought-provoking study of the historic DNA of Methodist discipleship. With applications and questions for readers of all churches and denominations, it argues for a shift of focus from 'doing church differently' to 'being communities of disciples.'



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ISSN 0144-171X

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Tel: 01223 464748

Registered Charity No. 327014

Printed by Hassall & Lucking Ltd. Tel: 0115 973 3292

ISBN 978-1-85174-865-5



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