



# Holiness

## Rediscovering our Heritage

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*Paul Smith takes another  
look at Christian Holiness*

Holiness is not a popular word or concept in the church today. We are more often concerned about growing the congregation, reaching out with the gospel, serving the community, campaigning for social justice. Many people feel that holiness is either something to be avoided, no one likes a 'Holy Joe', or far above the spiritual reach of the ordinary Christian. Yet the conviction which lay at Wesley's heart that the Methodist people had been raised up under God to promote the life of holiness.

At the 1763 Conference, the question was asked, 'What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the preachers called Methodists?' The answer was given, 'To reform the nation and in particular, the Church; to spread Scriptural holiness through the land' (Large Minutes 1862). We can be in no doubt about the significance of the question, and the answer given, as we remember that it was repeated at every Conference for the next twenty-six years.

On 15 September 1789 he wrote to Robert Carr Brackenbury,

*'Full sanctification is 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 us up'*

Letters of John Wesley Vol 8. 238

Here we are dealing with something, not on the periphery, but at the core of the gospel as Wesley understood it. He was in no doubt that God's purpose was not simply to count people righteous when they were not, but to make them righteous. To be a Christian involved, for Wesley, not just a change in status, but a change in nature. He was bold enough to believe that everything in the life of the Christian which is contrary to God's will could be dealt with. So how did he arrive at this conclusion?

### WESLEY'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

There can be no doubt that the devotion and discipline of his childhood in the rectory at Epworth had a profound effect. Under the direction of his mother Susanna, strongly influenced as it was by Puritanism, he accepted the truth of scripture, came to know what a Christian believes, and understood very clearly that a particular life-style is required if we are to fulfil God's requirements.

With this spiritual framework, Charles and John went to Oxford where they were appalled by the excesses so often found in university cities. In the face of this something had to be done to strengthen their faith, so they banded together with others of the same mind for shared devotions and Christian conversation, and to minister to the poor and underprivileged, particularly prisoners. Their fellow students derided them as 'Bible Moths' or 'Methodists' but they chose a title far more indicative of their intentions. They called themselves 'The Holy Club', for the pursuit of holiness was their aim.

At the age of twenty-two, his father pressed John to enter holy orders, which eventually he did, and providentially at this time he read Thomas a Kempis' 'Christian Pattern' and subsequently William Law's 'Christian Perfection' and 'Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life'. They all had a profound effect on John Wesley. He writes, 'By my continued efforts to keep his whole law, inward and outward, to the utmost of my power, I was persuaded that I should be accepted of him ...' (Journal, vol. 1, p. 467). There is little doubt that this



desire to prove himself acceptable to God was a strong contributing factor in his decision to offer himself to serve the colonies. On 14 October 1735 John, together with his brother Charles, and Benjamin Ingham, formerly a member of the Holy Club, all now priests in the Church of England, embarked first for Gravesend to board ‘The Simmonds’ and then on to Georgia. For both John and Charles, for different reasons, their trip proved to be a disaster. The only redeeming feature was that it brought them into contact with a group of Moravians, also emigrating, a relationship which continued during their stay in Georgia and subsequently back in England. The Wesley brothers were deeply affected by the faith of the Moravians, not least their quiet confidence and faith in the midst of a storm in mid-Atlantic.

It was the Moravians, and particularly Peter Böhler, who introduced John Wesley to a new way of being a Christian. It was Pietism, emphasising the religion of the heart. This in turn led to the Aldersgate Experience of 24 May 1738 of which Wesley says ‘I felt my heart strangely warmed and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sin, even mine ...’ Now he had the key. Being a Christian is not just about what we believe and how we behave; it is about something which happens in the heart, and crucially, something which God does. This realisation shaped all Wesley’s subsequent thinking, not least his teaching on Christian holiness. So, what did he believe and proclaim about holiness, and how can it be ours?

WESLEY’S HOLINESS TEACHING

Holiness is essentially about difference. In the Old Testament we see it clearly. Certain articles were considered holy; so were buildings, a people and a nation. They were different from other similar articles, buildings and people; and the difference lay in the fact that they were dedicated to God. They belonged to him. This view of holiness as difference helps us to understand some of the regulations of the Old

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Testament; others may do this or that, but we do not because we are different, belonging to God. So the life of holiness must be lived in contrast to the world’s view and culture. Wesley knew that before Aldersgate. The essential change now was that he came to see that this necessary change is brought about by what God does, not by our effort. We are not made holy by what we do but by what God does in us. It is all of grace.

At this point we need to clear a few things which may be obstacles out of the way. The first is Wesley’s understanding of sin. He clearly understood and taught that there are some things which fall short of God’s perfect will and will not be completely removed this side of heaven; lapses of memory, or inadvertent oversights which may subsequently mean that others are hurt. But Wesley would not call these sins. They are part and parcel of what it means to be human but sin ‘properly so called’ must involve the will. Sin is the wilful transgression of the known will of God.

We also need to deal with an area for which he was deeply criticised; he called it ‘Christian Perfection’. When challenged he simply retorted that this is the word which Jesus used (Matthew 5:48). He defined it as the fulfilment of the Great Commandment. As William Greathouse puts it, it is:

the loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength; and the loving our neighbour, every man, as our own souls. Such fulfilment ‘implies that no wrong temper, contrary to love, remains in the soul, and that all thoughts, words and actions are governed by pure love.’ In the ‘Scripture Way of Salvation’ he says, ‘It is love excluding sin, love filling the heart, taking up every capacity of the soul’.

William Greathouse, ‘John Wesley’s Theology of Christian Perfection’, Ilkeston: Moorley’s, p. 4.

It was the teaching of the New Testament that convinced Wesley that such a life ought to be considered normal for every Christian. Further, whilst he accepted that some entered into such a life over a period of time he also argued strongly that one could enter in a moment. We are justified in a moment, so we can be sanctified in a moment. Thus he pointed to a second crisis experience, sometimes called ‘the Second Blessing’ as the gateway to the life of holiness, New Testament Christianity. Yet this ought to be seen, not as the destination, but the entry point to a life lived in moment-by-moment consecration. Writing to John Mason he urges him to ‘press all the believers to expect deliverance from sin every moment’ (quoted in WE Sangster. ‘The Path to Perfection’, p. 86).

THE CHALLENGE FOR TODAY

The Church today, not least the Methodist Church, has many pressing needs; but the most vital is for more godly people; people whose lives have been transformed by love divine, who are consumed by it,

driven by it, sacrifice everything for it and glory in it. Everything about our history says that can happen. They said of Wesley that he took holiness out of the monastery and put it in the market place. It is for every Christian. Let the longing for holiness capture your heart. You might begin by quietly reflecting on some of Charles Wesley’s great holiness hymns, preferably in the Methodist Hymn Book if you can still find a copy! What he describes as aspirational is a glorious possibility for us all. God give us a hunger for holiness, and then satisfy our hunger.



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PRAYER FOCUS

**CHRISTIAN HOLINESS:** A desire amongst individuals and churches to seek a new/renewed understanding of Holiness and the transformation that it can bring; for the church to return to its Wesleyan roots of spreading Scriptural Holiness across the land; the wind of the Spirit to fall bringing restoration and a longing to move into a deeper relationship with God. (1 Thessalonians 4:7; Leviticus 20:7).

**FOCUS ON THE CHURCH: Children and Young People:** Inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit for all youth and children’s workers connexionally; the ongoing work of 3-Generate; clear Biblically based teaching; protection from erroneous teaching and false doctrine. (Proverbs 2:1-6; Titus 2:7-9).

**Cliff College:** Cliff College: Ashley Cooper as he steps down as Principal and for Andrew Stobart as he takes up the role; for continued evangelical teaching for students; continuity for the staff. (Exodus 18:21; Ephesians 4: 11-16).

Prayer Focus is compiled by Roz Addington. If you would like to contact Roz feel free to email: [prayer@metrevive.uk](mailto:prayer@metrevive.uk)

**FOCUS ON NATIONAL ISSUES: National Leaders:** Integrity and justice, wisdom and strength for the Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer and all members of the Cabinet; a return to God and the move of the Holy Spirit at the centre of government and the formulating of godly policies; the Royal family. (Zechariah 7:8-10; Proverbs 28:2).

**The Vulnerable:** People struggling to make ends meet – those on low incomes, especially people with young families and the elderly; adequate resources for organisations trying to help - food banks, help with debt especially Christians Against Poverty; those living with disabilities and special needs. (Acts 20:35; Proverbs 31:8-9).

**FOCUS ON WORLD ISSUES: Russian/Ukraine War:** De-escalation of the conflict; concern over the increase of Russian espionage/sabotage across Europe, and the involvement of North Korea and China; for God to act towards Putin; Russian people to see through the lies perpetrated; resilience for the Ukrainian people and the resources needed to combat Putin’s advances. (Psalm 33:13-16 & 18-22; Romans 1:18).

