



## WHAT I OWE TO THE WESLEYS

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### Part One – John Newton

Benedictines and Franciscans, whom I have grown to love, find no conflict in their wider obedience to the whole Church and their filial obedience to the founding fathers of their Orders.

In much the same way my teaching and pastoral ministry has drawn much of its zeal and perspective from the co-founders of a Methodist movement which sits four-square within the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

There are at least five strands in the original Methodism of the Wesleys which I would take with me to the end of my ministry, and which I would lovingly and jealously hand to the next generation of Mr Wesley's preachers and future Methodist societies.

Firstly, I think I would say that the Wesleys have made me a reluctant schismatic (with a special love for the Anglican tradition), but that they have also given me cautious sympathy with Christian breakaway movements.

The ecclesiastical landscape has markedly changed over the last 50 years. We may be confident that John and Charles Wesley would rejoice at the steadily increasing co-operation between Anglicans and Methodists today. They share in theological training, most notably at the Queen's College, Birmingham. They take part in hundreds of Local Ecumenical Projects and shared church agreements all over the country. Anglicans are well represented in the 150 ministers of other Churches listed in the current Minutes of Conference as 'Recognised and Regarded' as Methodists.

The Wesley brothers would surely greet these developments as part of the merciful

providence of God. Ardent devotees to the Methodist Societies, the Wesleys were at the same time deeply committed to their Mother, the Church of England. Their parents were converts from Dissent to the Established Church, and more than a little of the zeal of the convert rubbed off on their sons. They were brought up, moreover, not simply as Anglicans, but in the High Church tradition. That gave them a powerful sense of the visible unity of the Church and its continuity back to the apostles. By upbringing and conviction the Wesleys were the last men to countenance schism or any breakaway movement from the Church.

Nevertheless, their ministry – and the Church's response to it – created a new denomination. Did it have to be so? Was renewal only possible at the cost of schism in the Church?

It is easy to argue that the eighteenth century Church of England was so moribund that any new movement of the Spirit could flourish only by breaking free of its palsied grip. The new wine, it is claimed, had to burst the old wineskins. That is all very well, but Methodists have sometimes carried this argument to excess. We must beware of overkill. We may paint the Church of England in such dark colours as to make incomprehensible how a renewal movement like Methodism could have sprung from it. In Gospel terms, how could such a corrupt tree produce such good fruit?

That there was corruption in the Church in which the Wesleys began their ministry is undoubted. Non-resident and pluralist clergy; lack of sound preaching and pastoral care; bishops more concerned with affairs of state than the condition of their dioceses: such abuses were commonplace.

On the other hand, there also stood out, like good deeds in a naughty world, signs of life and growth. The Anglican Religious Societies were one of the clearest. In them young men and women met for prayer, Bible study, and religious conversation. They pledged themselves to personal evangelism, on the principle of 'each one, reach one.' They practised corporate works of mercy – caring for the poor, ministering to the sick, helping the inmates of the debtors' prisons. By 1692, London could number 32 such societies, and even in darkest Epworth we find Samuel Wesley beginning one in 1701.

Again, the Welsh Revival, which ante-dated Methodism, was the fruit of the preaching and pastoral labours of Griffith Jones and his fellow Anglican clergy. The Holy Club likewise began in the Anglican stronghold of the University of Oxford, whose intellectual demise, like the report of Mark Twain's death, has been greatly exaggerated.

Nor should we underestimate the witness of faithful individual believers. The studies of John Wain and Gordon Rupp have shown how utterly central the Christian faith was to the life and thought of Dr Johnson. Samuel Wesley's faithful care of souls at Epworth reminds us that not all the clergy were pleasure-loving 'squarsons' or idle drones. There was life and vigour in the Church, for all its many faults. Had it been otherwise, how could it have produced ministers of the calibre of John and Charles Wesley?

Yet, for all the genuine piety to be found in individuals and small groups, the Church of England as an institution was in a parlous state when Methodism came on the scene. Its ministry cried out for a major blood transfusion – not surprising after the double haemorrhage it had suffered in the seventeenth century.

In 1660-1662, it lost some 1,800 Puritan clergy who refused to subscribe to the Act of Uniformity. They included men of the quality of Richard Baxter and Edmund Calamy,

not to mention both grandfathers of the Wesleys – Samuel Annesley and John Wesley. In 1690, there was a second blood-letting, when some of the best High-Churchmen left the Church. These were the men who chose the wilderness rather than accept William III as sovereign in place of James II, to whom they owed unqualified allegiance. They were led by Bancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and included Thomas Ken, William Law, and 400 of the parish clergy. Almost by definition, these men – Puritans or Non-Jurors – were not time-servers. No Church could afford to lose such pastors.

John Wesley grew up with sympathy for the High Church seceders. His reading led him eventually to conclude that the Puritans of the Great Ejection had been harshly treated, too. He could identify experientially with both groups when, as a Methodist leader, he felt himself bruised by Anglican church discipline.

He was led, therefore, to take up an attitude of ‘critical engagement’ towards the Church and her bishops. Neither he nor Charles ever wavered in their love and loyalty to the Church of England, but conscience constrained them to act in what Professor Adrian Hastings would call ‘filial disobedience.’

Wesley sent out a small army of itinerant lay preachers, who ignored as he did all parish boundaries in pursuing their ministry, to the chagrin of most bishops and clergy. The brothers formed a network of Methodist societies ‘in connexion with’ Mr Wesley.

The Anglican authorities found these practices hard to accept. Not all were unsympathetic, however, and granted some institutional goodwill, the Methodists might just possibly have been held within the Anglican fold. Yet part of the tragedy of eighteenth century Anglicanism was the Church’s loss of its vocal organs. The Convocations of York and Canterbury, for complex political reasons, never met between 1717 and 1852. In other words, during the whole of Methodism’s first century, the two senior courts of the Church were in abeyance.

The Wesley brothers steadfastly resisted every move in the Conference of preachers which favoured a formal breach with the Church of England. They remained loyal to the last, urging Methodists to attend their parish churches to receive the Sacrament, and warning the preachers not to make personal attacks on the Anglican clergy, however much of their ministry might be open to criticism.

Yet Methodism continued to grow apart from its Mother Church, and the breach was sealed by Wesley’s ordination of preachers for America and Scotland.

Charles, who was always less inclined to ‘filial disobedience’ than John, saw with brutal clarity that ‘ordination is separation’ and so it proved. With the death of the Wesleys, the remaining links between Methodism and the Church of England were steadily eroded.

What, then, does the reaction of the Wesleys to their Mother Church have to say to us today? They challenge us in a twofold sense.

On the one hand, they say to us: ‘You are part of the establishment now. You, as Methodists, have to face the disturbing growth of new movements, both inside and outside the mainstream of your church life. How are you going to respond to them?’

Do we not need to take serious stock of the proliferations of new groups and movements among Christians today, and ask what the Spirit is saying to us through them? Movements of Charismatic Renewal; house churches; independent Christian

fellowships; and the many new forms of religious community, both Evangelical and Catholic: and all these pose sharp questions for Methodism. Their growth and dynamism highlight our own areas of decline and low morale.

If we are to be true to the Wesleys, we shall be open-minded in our appraisal of such new movements; not blind to any faults they may display, but ready to receive the new life that may flow from them. We need this kind of ‘critical engagement’ with them which the Wesleys showed towards the Church of England, and which the Church, by and large, so sadly failed to accord them.

On the other side, we can take heart from the Wesleys, who did not write off their Mother Church as irreformable and incapable of renewal. The God who can make dry bones live, and raise up new sons and daughters of Abraham out of the very stones by the roadside, can also revivify the mainstream Churches, including Methodism.

Secondly I would say the Wesleys have taught me to sing and versify my spirituality and my theology.

It is as impossible to separate the Wesley hymns from the first springs of Methodism as to divorce the singing of the Marseillaise from the revolutionary Republic of France.

The hymns gave fire and courage to the first Methodists. They, like their leaders, were drawn into conflict situations, and found in their hymns strength for the battle. We may claim for the hymns, in terms of spiritual power, what was alleged for the Marseillaise in terms of military might: it was worth 10,000 men to the armies of the Republic.

What gave the hymns their power and distinctive force as a vehicle of religious renewal?

They were unusual, first, in combining a profound personal experience of Christ with a strong affirmation of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith. The hymns of Isaac Watts did the same, of course; but those were sung in churches and congregations. The Wesley hymns were characteristically sung, not only in meetings for worship, but in the open air. They were freighted with evangelical appeal, and addressed direct to an unbelieving and often hostile world. They were a central part of the mission to England – and beyond – which Wesley inaugurated.

The hymn that for so long stood first in Methodist hymnbooks, ‘O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise,’ combines all these notes. There is the direct appeal to the crowd who have gathered for the open-air preaching. There is a deep strain of personal devotion, together with a massive setting forth of the Redemption in Christ:

See all your sins on Jesus laid:  
The Lamb of God was slain;  
His soul was once an offering made  
For every soul of man.

Not all Christians, and not all Methodists, however, find themselves at ease with the Wesley hymns. Some would contend that they are overfull of personal religious emotion, and that they may encourage an unhealthy and unbiblical individualism. Certainly they are full of words like rapture and delight, and there is a high frequency of words like me and mine. There is a corybantic element in both words and rhythm

of such a hymn as

My God, I am thine;  
What a comfort divine,  
What a blessing to know that my Jesus is mine!  
In the heavenly Lamb  
Thrice happy I am,  
And my heart it doth dance at the sound of his name.

Yet one of the authentic marks of New Testament Christianity is surely joy, and there is joy in abundance in these hymns. They enabled many converts to express the joy of their new-found faith. Some Methodists may have gone overboard on personal feelings; but there were within the hymns powerful checks on self-indulgence.

The first check is provided by the strong theological meat the hymns contain. They are not frothy, emotional lyrics. The personal piety they express is contained within a firm doctrinal framework, as in John Wesley's great Trinitarian hymn, which closes with the paean:

Blessing and honour, praise and love,  
Co-equal, co-eternal Three,  
In earth below, and heaven above,  
By all thy works be paid to thee!

The second restraint on unbridled emotion in the hymns is their profound substratum of Scripture. Beneath the flesh of the Wesleys' verse lies a firm bone structure of biblical material. Biblical echoes, allusions, citations and motifs are Charles Wesley's stock in trade. There is none of the woodenness that sometimes mars the metrical paraphrases of the Psalms. Rather the hymns give us 'the Scriptures in solution.'

Charles moulds his material into new form with supreme religious art, without ever distorting or betraying it. Whoever would have thought that he could take a routine verse from the list of priestly duties – 'The fire shall always be burning upon the altar; it shall not go out' (Leviticus 6.13) – and transmute it by his genius into:

O thou who earnest from above  
The pure celestial fire to impart,  
Kindle a flame of sacred love  
On the mean altar of my heart!  
  
There let it for thy glory burn  
With inextinguishable blaze,  
And trembling to its source return,  
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

One can sing and pray these hymns for a lifetime, and still find new insights into their scriptural depths. Singing, one Good Friday, that great hymn of the Passion, 'God of unexampled grace,' I suddenly discerned new meaning in its final, climactic verse:

Never love nor sorrow was  
Like that my Saviour showed;  
See him stretched on yonder cross,  
And crushed beneath our load!  
Now discern the Deity,  
Now his heavenly birth declare;

Faith cries out: 'Tis he, 'tis he,  
My God, that suffers there!

The realisation all at once struck home that in, 'Now discern the Deity, Now his heavenly birth declare. . .' Wesley is drawing on the confession of the centurion at Calvary, 'Truly, this man was the Son of God.'

If theology and Scripture help to canalise the religious emotion of the hymns, so does their association with the objectivity of the Eucharist. So important is sacramental faith and practice to the Wesleys that a whole collection of their hymns is entitled *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*. It is striking that, in our ecumenical era, Anglicans, Catholics and Orthodox are discovering with no little amazement, what an immeasurably rich vein of sacramental devotion is to be found in these hymns. They remind us of the frequent communion practised by the Wesleys; of the great sacramental services of early Methodism, with their reverent silences, punctuated by the joyful singing of hymns like, 'Victim divine, thy grace we claim' –

We need not now go up to heaven,  
To bring the long-sought Saviour down;  
Thou art to all already given,  
Thou dost ev'n now thy banquet crown;  
To every faithful soul appear,  
And show thy real presence here!

The robust sacramental devotion of these hymns has been too much for some later Methodists. The compilers of *Hymns and Psalms*, like those of the *Methodist Hymn Book*, clearly knew better than Wesley where the great eucharistic hymn, 'O God of our forefathers, hear' belonged. They put it in the section on prayer, rather than where Wesley placed it, in the hymns on the Lord's Supper. Where else should lines like these be set?

With solemn faith we offer up,  
And spread before thy glorious eyes,  
That only ground of all our hope,  
That precious, bleeding sacrifice,  
Which brings thy grace on sinners down,  
And perfects all our souls in one.

The final preventive against emotion running riot in the hymns is their consistent witness that the essence of the Christian life is 'Faith, working by love' (Galatians 5.6).

The test of our religious experience is not how great a head of steam it generates in terms of feelings, but whether it sets upon our daily life and character the seal of Christ-like love.

In a hymn which is a prayer for the gift of the Spirit, 'Jesus, the gift divine I know,' Wesley spells out the authentic marks of the Spirit's presence:

Thy mind throughout my life be shown,  
While listening to the sufferer's cry,  
The widow's and the orphan's groan,  
On mercy's wings I swiftly fly,  
The poor and helpless to relieve,  
My life, my all, for them to give.

Thus may I show thy Spirit within,  
Which purges me from every stain;  
Unspotted from the world and sin,  
My faith's integrity maintain;  
The truth of my religion prove  
By perfect purity and love.

What do the Wesleys say to us, as their successors, through the searching challenge of their hymns? They bring home to us the need to possess our possessions. How often have Methodists claimed, to other Christians and themselves, that these hymns are one of the great treasures of our tradition? Are they really ours? Have we the biblical understanding or the Christian experience to make them truly our own? Or is it the fact that the point of our denominational pride is in practice our Achilles heel?

It would be good if one of the fruits of the 1988 celebrations were to be that we should enter more fully into our incomparable heritage.

These hymns have so much to offer, with their biblical Christianity, devotion to Christ, missionary ardour, sacramental piety, and the sheer joy of faith.

Thirdly, I would say that throughout my ministry I have been haunted by Wesley's dictum, 'Go not to those who need you, but to those who need you most.'

It was surely no accident that the text of the first open-air sermon Wesley preached after 1738 was Luke 4.18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind: to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

When Jesus read those words in the synagogue at Nazareth, with such electrifying effect on his hearers, they set the keynote of his public ministry. The same was true of his servant, John Wesley, when he preached from these great words of promise and fulfilment, on an April afternoon in 1739.

He preached his sermon in a brickyard in Bristol, close to where Temple Meads station stands today. Yet he loathed doing it. It offended against all his gentlemanly instincts, against his Oxford and Anglican sense of propriety. Over 30 years later, he confided to his Journal: 'To this day field-preaching is a cross to me.' Nevertheless he did it. He bit the bullet, swallowed his pride, and became a fool for Christ's sake. His Journal entry continues: 'But I know my commission, and see no other way of "preaching the Gospel to every creature."'

That was the nub of the matter for Wesley. He was in some ways a rather staid, conventional clergyman. He needed some gunpowder behind him to turn him into a field-preacher and itinerant evangelist.

The Spirit of God provided the dynamite, but it was fired by a triple fuse.

First, and very important for Wesley the pragmatist, was the visible effectiveness of George Whitefield's open-air preaching of the Gospel. When Whitefield began preaching the new birth, and the power of Christ to make men and women new creatures, he provoked scepticism. Some of the sober citizens of Bristol replied, in effect: 'If you believe that, George, then go and preach it to the Kingswood miners.'

They live like brutes in the forest. They come storming and looting into our city. They need a new nature, if anyone does. Go and tell it to the miners.'

So Whitefield did precisely that. He went to the poorest of the poor, the off-scourings of society, the dregs. Wesley witnessed the results. He saw what Whitefield described as the first breakthrough of the Revival's power, when the tears of penitence coursed down the coal-black faces of rough miners, and traced white runnels down their cheeks.

That was the first fuse that lit the powder for Wesley, as a preacher to the poor. The second – vital for the man who had been nicknamed Mr 'Primitive Christianity' at Oxford – was the example of the Lord and his apostles. As he read of Jesus preaching to the common people, on the hills and by the lakeside, it struck Wesley like a blow in the face that 'field-preaching' was as old as Christianity. The evidence of Whitefield impressed Wesley. The example of his Lord was decisive.

The third factor was his urgent desire 'to announce good news to the poor,' to offer Christ to those who often had little hope in this world or the next.

Many poor people did indeed find Wesley's preaching good news. They were, in Wesley's own words, both 'literally and spiritually' poor. There is no false other-worldliness here. Wesley is concerned about physical want as well as spiritual poverty. He knew well enough what both conditions meant.

Methodists have sometimes overlooked the fact that Wesley had known poverty at first hand. He came from a family of 19 children, of whom his mother reared no less than ten. His father, who had a continual struggle to make ends meet, was once put in Lincoln jail for debt. His mother, in this crisis, sought help from the Archbishop of York, John Sharp, who asked her: 'Tell me, Mrs Wesley, whether you ever really wanted bread?' To which she replied, with scrupulous truth: 'My lord, I will freely own to your grace that, strictly speaking, I never did want bread. But then, I had so much care to get it before it was eat, and to pay for it after, as has often made it very unpleasant to me. And I think to have bread on such terms is the next degree of wretchedness to having none at all!' So, evidently, did the archbishop, for he helped her generously.

This family background of poverty gave an even keener edge to John Wesley's evangelical concern for the poor. He never patronised poor people, never made light of their troubles, never treated them with disrespect. He urged the London stewards in 1747, when they were to disburse the monies collected in the classes for the poor: 'Put yourself in the place of every poor man, and deal with him as you would God should deal with you.'

One of the golden threads running through his ministry, was his commitment to minister to the needs of the literally poor.

He worked to relieve suffering among prisoners of war.

He set up dispensaries with free medicines for the poor.

He founded Orphan Houses in London and Newcastle.

He encouraged the Methodists to fund a network of local Strangers'

Friend Societies, to provide food and shelter for poor travellers, who would otherwise have had to sleep rough.

All these were part of early Methodism's attempt to minister to the literally poor.

Wesley was also deeply concerned, of course, to minister to the spiritually poor. In

practice, he often found that the literally poor and the ‘poor in spirit’ were one and the same people.

Many poor people came to know their need of God, and to cry out, ‘God have mercy on me a sinner!’ So Charles Wesley could sing of God’s Spirit in the Revival,

He hath opened a door  
To the penitent poor  
And rescued from sin  
And admitted the harlots and publicans in.

When Wesley said ‘poor’ he meant poor in every sense. For a vivid glimpse of apostolic Christianity in the England of Lord Chesterfield and Beau Nash, we need only turn to hymn 550 in *Hymns and Psalms* – ‘Lamb of God, whose dying love we now recall to mind:’ it takes us back to Tyburn Tree, the great gallows of eighteenth century London, where Marble Arch stands today. In Wesley’s century, some 10,000 men, women and children were hanged on that spot. They were mostly poor people, many of them hanged for petty theft.

Property ranked higher in the scale of values than did human life. Methodists like Silas Told, Sarah Peters, and Charles Wesley visited the prisoners in Newgate, rode with them on the cart to Tyburn, and prayed with them at the end. Wesley’s *Journal* for 1748 records the conversion in jail of John Lancaster. When he came to the scaffold, and was given the chance to say the traditional last word to the crowd, he gave out a hymn. He and his fellow-Methodists sang it before he was turned off. Put it back into that life-setting, and the words are charged with even deeper meaning:

Lamb of God, whose dying love  
We now recall to mind,  
Send the answer from above,  
And let us mercy find;  
Think on us, who think on thee,  
And every struggling soul release;  
O remember Calvary,  
And bid us go in peace!

‘Think on us. . .’ – condemned felons – ‘who think on thee’ (‘Jesus, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom’): it is the voice of the dying thief with which John Lancaster calls upon his Saviour. ‘Every struggling soul release’ – at the moment of death, just about to be turned off the scaffold. ‘O remember Calvary,’ the place of execution and public shame, where you, Lord, were put to death between two thieves. You can hardly get deeper, in *Mission Alongside the Poor*, than that.

How does the Wesleys’ *Mission Alongside the Poor* challenge us today? First, they were not afraid to ask the rich some straight questions, as we see from John’s sermon on the dangers of wealth. ‘O ye lovers of money, hear the word of the Lord. . . Open your eyes! Look all around you! Are the richest men the happiest? Have those the largest share of content who have the largest possessions? Is not the very reverse true?’

He once preached to a prosperous and fashionable congregation on the text, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ When one irate member of the bourgeoisie afterwards accosted Wesley with his impertinence, telling him he should have preached that sermon to the riff-raff of Spitalfields, Wesley dissented. He replied that, if he had been preaching to the poor, his text would have

been, 'Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.'

We speak of Mission *Alongside* the Poor, implying closeness, solidarity with the poor in their time of need. How close are we in fact? Can we come closer, without adopting something of the simple, disciplined life-style of the first Methodists? Perhaps the most searching challenge of all with which Wesley presents us is to make us ask how deep our Mission *Alongside* the Poor goes.

Fourthly, I would hope that I could claim for myself Wesley's 'Catholic spirit.'

Wesley never disguises the fact that, as a Protestant, he has serious differences with the Church of Rome, Yet he freely acknowledges that there are many 'real Christians' within it, and he repudiates the view – common among eighteenth century Protestants – that Rome was no true Church at all.

Certainly Roman Catholics in our day have responded warmly to Wesley's *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, which Dr Albert Outler called his 'Olive branch to the Romans.' When, in 1968, an Irish Jesuit, Michael Hurley, brought out a new edition of the *Letter*, the preface was written by Cardinal Bea, the then secretary of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. He sees the letter as anticipating by more than a century and a half 'many of the insights and ideals of the modern ecumenical movement.'

First, Wesley's approach is to stress the many basic truths which separated Christians hold in common, before looking at the doctrines which divide them. The divisive factors are looked at in the context of a fundamental, given unity; and that makes all the difference. However serious may be the things which divide us, Wesley holds that the things that unite us are more important still.

Secondly, Wesley's *Letter* makes an important distinction between ecumenism – the search for fuller unity among Christians of different communions – and proselytising. He writes to his Roman Catholic 'correspondent': 'My dear friend, consider: I am not persuading you to leave or change your religion, but to follow after that fear and love of God without which all religion is vain.'

Finally, Wesley insists that the considerable measure of unity which separated Christians already have, must be expressed in practical charity. In one of his most luminous phrases, he pleads, 'if we cannot as yet *think alike* in all things, at least we may *love alike*.' We are reminded of brother Charles' great hymn of Christian unity, 'Christ, from whom all blessings flow...'

Love, like death, has all destroyed,  
Rendered all distinctions void;  
Names, and sects, and parties fall;  
Thou, O Christ, art all in all.

The other place where Wesley nails his ecumenical colours to the mast is, of course, his sermon on 'Catholic Spirit,' preached on 2 Kings 10.15 – 'Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? ... If it be, give me thine hand.' Here again he distinguishes between basic Christianity, and 'opinions' or secondary matters of faith and practice, which divide Christians.

Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they

are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.

It should be tolerably clear by now that any anti-ecumenical group which tries to conscript John Wesley into its ranks is an illegal press-gang. What, then, does his strong ecumenical commitment say to us today? Cardinal Bea found it highly topical, and so may we.

The first thing to be said about it is that it is utterly Christ-centred. Wesley sees with great clarity that as we are drawn more nearly to Jesus, in faith and love, we shall be drawn closer to each other in the unity of his Body. John and Charles sing the same song here. Charles' prayer, in the great hymn of unity, is:

Closer knit to thee, our Head,  
Nourished, Lord, by thee, and fed,  
Let us daily growth receive,  
More in Jesus Christ believe.

John's sermon on *Catholic Spirit*, expounding his text, 'is thine heart right. . . ?' asks the questions that go to the heart of the matter:

Dost thou believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, 'God over all, blessed for ever'? Is he 'revealed in' thy soul? Dost thou 'know Jesus Christ and him crucified'? Does he 'dwell in thee, and thou in him'? Is he 'formed in thy heart by faith'? . . .

And art thou, through him, 'fighting the good fight of faith, and laying hold of eternal life'?

Secondly, Wesley is concerned for the unity of *all* Christians. He is not selective in his ecumenism. He is not concerned simply to draw nearer to those Christians for whom he feels a natural affinity, those nearest to him in churchmanship or theology. He is willing to work with, and learn from, the Moravians. He extends the hand of friendship to Roman Catholics. He readily accepts the invitation to address the students at Philip Doddridge's Academy, where students for the Dissenting Ministry were trained. His catholicity is impressive.

In our day, on the other hand, we often find a certain choosiness in ecumenical relations. There are Anglicans who long for union with the Roman Catholic Church, but who have frankly little interest in the Free Churches. There are Methodists who would rejoice at closer Free Church unity, but for whom Anglicans, Catholics and Orthodox are all rather beyond the pale. There are Christians of all the mainstream Churches, keen on unity among themselves, but with little concern for, say, the Pentecostals, the Black-led churches, or the house church movement.

Wesley would have us think again, if we fall into such categories. He would say to us, 'How catholic is your "Catholic Spirit"? How universal is your ecumenical concern? Are you concerned for the unity of *all* Christian people? If God doesn't pick and choose, why should you?'

It has been said that a genuine commitment to Christian unity requires a kind of conversion. The scales need to fall from our eyes, as we see for the first time the scandal of a divided Church preaching the Gospel of reconciliation to a broken world.

Wesley experienced an ecumenical, as well as an evangelical, conversion. He was transformed from a rigid High Churchman to one whose stance was as inclusive as the love of God itself.

Dr Olive Wyon once recalled in her writing the testimony of another High Churchman, a self-confessed prickly Anglo-Catholic. He acknowledged of himself, ‘I used to be a “spike,” until I heard a Nonconformist pray; and then all my spikes fell off.’ Wesley’s spikes began to fall off when he encountered Christ in the living faith of the Moravian Brethren.

Finally, I would stand with Wesley to the last on the whole Gospel for the whole person.

Charles’ hymns and John’s writings testify to their holistic approach to healing. They believed the healing of the whole person is a central aim of the Gospel. Take Charles’ great hymn of healing, ‘Jesus, thy far-extended fame,’ which begins with the Gospel ministry:

Sinners of old thou didst receive  
With comfortable words and kind,  
Their sorrows cheer, their wants relieve,  
Heal the diseased, and cure the blind.

It goes on to claim the same healing power of Jesus for men and women now, in a question confidently expecting the answer Yes:

And art thou not the Saviour still,  
In every place and age the same?

Charles then concludes his hymn by claiming Christ’s power to heal the spirit as well as to restore the body:

Faith in thy changeless name I have;  
The good, the kind physician, thou  
Art able now our souls to save,  
Art willing to restore them now.  
  
Wouldst thou the body’s health restore,  
And not regard the sin-sick soul?  
The soul thou lovest yet the more,  
And surely thou shalt make it whole.

What Charles sings of in verse, John expounds in his writings. His do-it-yourself manual of health care, *Primitive Physic*, came out in 1747 and by the year of his death had run through 23 editions. It was savaged by some of the medical profession, and has often been ridiculed since. Indeed the laugh comes easy with some of his remedies, as when he confidently offers as a cure for baldness rubbing the scalp with honey and onions.

Again, the sub-title of his little book – *An Easy and Natural Method of curing most Diseases* – may reasonably be thought naive and simplistic. Yet for all that, the book has great virtues.

First, it is written out of compassion. Before the National Health Service was founded, it was a proverbial saying that ‘The poor cannot afford to be ill.’ Wesley knew that truth, and was appalled by it – hence his dispensaries and free medicines for the poor. *Primitive Physic* was meant to place in the hands of simple people, who could not afford a professional physician, a practical handbook of medical care.

In offering cheap, simple, easily available remedies, he asks: ‘Who would not wish to

have a physician always in his house, and one that attends without fee or reward? to be able (unless in some few complicated cases) to prescribe to his family as well as himself?’

Secondly, *Primitive Physic* is strikingly psychosomatic in its approach to sickness and health. Wesley is clear that spiritual dis-ease can issue in bodily disorders. The closing paragraph of his preface sets out some of his fundamental assumptions:

- 1 The passions have a greater influence on health than most people are aware of.
- 2 All violent and sudden passions dispose to, or actually throw people into, acute diseases.
- 3 The slow and lasting passions, such as grief and hopeless love, bring on chronic diseases.
- 4 Till the passion which caused the disease is calmed, medicine is applied in vain.

His final word serves to extol the healing virtue of the love of God. As Charles can exclaim of the name of Jesus – ‘’Tis life and health and peace,’ John writes in the same mode: ‘The love of God, as it is the sovereign remedy of all miseries, so in particular it effectually prevents all the bodily disorders the passions introduce, by keeping the passions themselves within due bounds. And by the unspeakable joy, and perfect calm, serenity, and tranquillity it gives the mind, it becomes the most powerful of all the means of health and long life.’

Again, Wesley does not isolate symptoms. He tries to treat the whole patient. He is concerned for prevention as well as cure, and underlines the need for a healthy life-style.

‘The power of exercise,’ he urges, ‘both to preserve and restore health, is greater than can well be conceived, especially in those who add temperance thereto; who ... steadily observe both that kind and measure of food which experience shows to be most friendly to health and strength.’ He is concerned that ‘Everyone that would preserve health should be as clean and sweet as possible in their houses, clothes and furniture.’ To sound diet, plentiful exercise, and regular hours of sleep, Wesley would add, ‘Above all . . . that old unfashionable medicine, prayer. And have faith in God.’

In this realm of health and healing, as in all else, there is a strongly pragmatic vein in Wesley. He recommends only ‘safe, cheap, and easy medicines,’ and as long as they work, he does not mind where he takes them from.

He shares with an increasing number of modern physicians a discriminating respect for traditional, herbal medicines. During his time in America, he had carefully observed the Indians’ use of herbs and plants, and had registered their often swift and curative effects.

It was his regard for traditional medicine that led him to entitle his book *Primitive Physic*. As with his constant reference in theology to the *Primitive Church*, his choice of adjective was complimentary in intent. Yet at the same time, he is no blind traditionalist. He is genuinely open to the new.

As he was willing to experiment with new evangelistic methods, so he will attempt fresh approaches to the healing art. His most celebrated venture was as an early pioneer in the use of electro-convulsive therapy (ECT). Some modern Methodists, at

least, who doubted their doctor's wisdom in recommending this treatment, have been reassured to know that it had the blessing of their founding father.

In medicine, as in theology, Wesley prizes the wisdom of the past, but is uncompromising in breaking new ground for the present. The traditionalist is also the pioneer.

Above all, Wesley wants to bring medicine, whether ancient or modern, within the reach of the poor. Just as he is committed to making the Gospel freely available to all people, so he strives to bring health and healing within the reach of all. For him the one task involves the other, as in one of his greatest hymns he invokes the redeeming love of God on all humanity:

Spirit of grace, and health, and power,  
Fountain of light and love below,  
Abroad thy healing influence shower,  
O'er all the nations let it flow.

## **Part Two – Donald Soper**

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,  
Bears all its sons away:  
They fly forgotten, as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.

This is from one of the most popular hymns. It is sung, not only in church on Sunday, but on the great social occasions such as Armistice-Tide. But is it true? Surely not, except for those who are dead already to the meaning and purpose of history.

Geography is not moulded by geographers, but history is inseparable from the 'sons of time.' It is the remembered story of human beings and the changes they have effected. To ignore their place in that story is one of the great perils of the modern age, in which so much that is new seems to be independent of what happened before, and controlled by forces indifferent to the personal characteristics of individuals who were the instruments, but not the agents, of change. Let me give this generalisation a 'local habitation and name.' The name is John Wesley. The local habitation is 18th century Britain, and the revival of religion in these islands which came to be known as Methodism – and it began 250 years ago.

It is no surprise that in this increasingly secular age, religious leaders tend to take a back seat, even if they are accorded standing room. Indeed, I wonder how many who profess to be students of what is going on have thought it necessary or even desirable to remember John Wesley.

As a Methodist minister, I declare an interest, but would argue that this 250th anniversary of John Wesley and the Methodist revival of religion in England is profoundly significant, if we are to make sense of the world around us today, and, in our understanding of it, to improve the prospects of tomorrow. In general terms, herein lies the answer to the question, 'What do I owe to the Wesleys?' and it specifies the more particular aspects of the revival which is indelibly associated with these two Anglican brothers.

John Wesley, like his brother Charles, came from the religious background of the

Anglican Church. His father was a parson, and he grew up in the ecclesiastical atmosphere of what is called 'deism.' The Church of England in the 18th century was largely committed to an arid theology bereft of deep emotional elements, and almost totally lacking in enthusiasm.

In his days as a student at Oxford University this 'neat and tidy little Anglican' came to feel the surge of evangelical fervour. At Oxford he and his friends were called 'Methodists' because they lived in a discipline of devotion and commitment. Leaving Oxford after he was ordained, he ventured across the Atlantic as a missionary. This adventure was much of a failure, but gave him the opportunity of meeting some Moravian Christians, who persuaded him that his enthusiasm needed to be rooted in a deeper sense of personal salvation. This he claimed was made known to him at a meeting at Aldersgate Street, when he returned from Georgia. Thereafter, to put it in simple terms, John Wesley became one of the great evangelists of the Christian era. A religious revival happened in 18th century England, and it was largely due to the taking of the Gospel out of doors by this neat little Anglican priest. Now the foregoing is a factual record that is indisputable.

The question however remains. Was this Methodist Revival, of which he was the spearhead and of which his brother was the hymn-writer, an episode, and nothing more, in repeated religious revivals, events which many today would claim as of decreasing significance? To put the issue in the language of modern political speculation, was John Wesley a phenomenon belonging to a superstitious past rather than to any realistic future? Was he just another dealer in the opium of the people, and if so, is he well forgotten?

The research in order to find an answer to this question can begin in the diary which John Wesley kept. By any standards it stands alongside those of Pepys and Evelyn. For more than forty years the keeper of this diary spent himself journeying up and down the country, preaching the gospel morning, noon and night, in churches and in the open air, calling his hearers to repent of their sins and become 'justified' by the deliberate act of faith in God through Jesus Christ's saving grace. From coal miners in Durham to tin miners in Cornwall he made religion the all important issue for ordinary people for whom the church of the day meant nothing.

The diary, however, does much more than record the doings of an indefatigable preacher. John Wesley's achievement in creating a religious organisation called Methodism, which today constitutes a world wide churchmanship, was the result of his organising ability. He realised the all important requirement of the 'follow up.' Wherever he preached, he made certain that he left behind him a permanent living cell. It was the class meeting, the regular gathering of Methodists sharing and maintaining their experience. He left the most explicit instructions as to their everyday behaviour. He even provided a book on family medicine, in which he was the first to advocate the therapeutic possibilities of electricity. It should be added that some of his other remedies were peculiar, to say the least of them.

Again, his care for those in need was both heartfelt, and at the same time essentially practical. The 'Friendly Society' in all its ramifications in the 19th century, and today, owes more to the work of John Wesley's Methodists than to any other movement of compassion in the 18th century.

Nonetheless, I would argue that in no respect is this man's ministry so significant and memorable as in his open-air preaching. I will presume to expand a little in seeking to

justify that comment, and I can claim a particular acquaintance with this aspect of Wesley's ministry. I have for 50 years pursued a soapbox vocation in Hyde Park and on Tower Hill – and apart from occasionally being knocked about a bit, it has not been physically or psychologically menacing. I marvel when I read of the violence, the threats and the melées which John Wesley put up with, when he could not control them. Pelted with stones (and on one occasion threatened by a butcher with a meat chopper), abused by mobs, pushed, shoved, and shouted down, he never gave up. That required courage enough: but he never watered down his fiery gospel to mollify his audience, and that required courage of an even higher order. John Wesley in the open air was a phenomenon. He *appeared*, and his appearance was invested with psychological or (as I would want to put it) spiritual dynamism.

Wesley took to field preaching largely because many church doors were shut against him. There must have been modifications in his sermons in the manner of their delivery, and the interruptions made the flow of his speaking often spasmodic rather than continuous. The evidence such as it is, and it is tantalizingly little, is that he offered Christ to the crowd, and set that offer within the framework of a conversion experience open to all who would repent of their sins, and yield themselves to the everlasting mercy of God. The emphasis was moral; what evidence he advanced was the word of God as infallibly expressed in the Bible. He called for immediate decision, and couched that call in the language of his brother's hymns. The effects of such preaching were indeed immediate. Over and over again the response was dramatic. The records tell of convulsions which convinced those who experienced them that the devil was being thrust out of the penitent sinner's life. Some fell in swoons, some acclaimed their salvation by shouts of deliverance, and there can be no doubt that a genuine revival experience took hold of many as they listened and as they responded.

The effect of his open-air preaching was widespread and deep. He was proclaiming an experience of satisfaction and hope for thousands of inhabitants of these islands whose lives were 'nasty, brutish and short.' It was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of the 'dispossessed' – the workers with no roots, the landless and the 'lumpen proletariat.' To thousands like these, John Wesley offered the dignity of the children of God. Unlike the great secular revolutionary programmes that began with the French Revolution and culminated (at least in theory) in the Russian Revolution, Wesley did not envisage the requirement of specific political change. He was a High Tory. The revolution he advocated was a personal one. Inevitably his preaching had results which went far beyond the individual behaviour patterns of those who experienced conversion from their drunkenness, or their malevolence, or their pride, or greed. Their conversion must have been reflected in the political and economic environment, yet it was an extension of personal changes which the diary so frequently records, rather than a basic social change. Nevertheless, Lecky the historian asserts that it was the impact of the Methodist Revival that prevented England undergoing, or achieving, a revolution of the same kind that happened in France in 1789. Be that as it may, it is a challenging proposition, and it provokes a strictly contemporary answer.

I believe that there is an imperative lesson for today to be culled from John Wesley's evangelism. Man needs the salvation which is an inner transformation of conduct and quality. At the same time he needs a political and social setting in which this transformation is encouraged to take place. The Gospel injunctions to 'repent and believe' and 'to seek first the Kingdom of God' are the two sides of the same

evangelical medal. My experience in trying to advocate Christianity as ‘the way, the truth and the life’ in a world so much changed during the last 250 years, is that politics and economics rather than piety have come to be regarded as the way things happen. The remembered names are those of Marx and Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler, and the innumerable exponents of political beliefs left, right and centre. Yet the world, and all those in it, are in a more comprehensive peril than ever. Apocalypse, from being a theological prospect, has become a practical probability. Man may be clever enough to survive, but is he good enough? To answer such an ultimate question needs more than the inspiration and memory of the politician and the economist. It needs the preacher of the good news that ‘salvation’ is available. That is why to ignore the moral and spiritual values is the depth of folly. That is why to remember men like Wesley is so supremely important, because this concentration of attention is a perilous half truth, and to link his personal message of salvation with the corporate and social virtues within which that personal experience must be set, is the one hope for our human future on this planet.

I have deliberately left to the last my gratitude for the sacramental witness and practice of the Wesleys, and I acknowledge a quite personal debt. I have spoken at some length of what can properly be called their evangelical contribution to the Christian faith. It was my introduction to the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship and my friendship with Dr Rattenbury that in both these brothers (though not so much in their co-partner in the open air, Whitefield) there was a profound sense of the sacramental nature of the Christian faith. Maybe Methodism has from time to time either forgotten or ignored this central element in the ministry of both of them. What is beyond any doubt is that their evangelical fervour was rooted in sacramental worship and was, they believed, indispensable to its advocacy.

I was brought up within the framework of Wesleyan Methodism, and I realise now how far much of it had departed from the sacramental element. As a boy I remember the Communion Service seemed to be an optional extra, appended to the 11 o’clock or 6.30 service, and often carelessly undertaken. I have learned since, and owe it to the Sacramental Fellowship, that the disciplined practice of sacramental worship is inseparable from a comprehensive presentation of the Christian faith in practice. To put it in quite personal terms. I need to stretch out my hands for the bread on Sunday morning if I am to offer that bread in Hyde Park later in the day. That perhaps is my deepest gratitude for the life and work of the Wesleys.