



Holiness of Heart and Life: Conclusion (part 6 of 6)

BY STEVE MANSKAR

This is the last of six parts from a paper I wrote and presented in August 2013. You will find part 1 [here](#), part 2 [here](#), part 3 [here](#), part 4 [here](#), and part 5 [here](#). Your comments are welcome.

Conclusion

The early Methodist societies lead by John and Charles Wesley were a missional movement. Their mission was “Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”^[1] They sought to be a movement of the Holy Spirit within the Church of England that would be outposts of the coming reign of God in Britain and America. For all their efforts the Methodists were held in low esteem by the leadership of their Church. They were regarded as troublemakers and an embarrassment. The secular and church press called the Methodists derogatory names, prominent among them, “enthusiasts.” In contemporary vernacular we would call such people “Bible thumpers” or “religious fanatics.” Those early Methodists were called names and embarrassed the church authorities because they expected God to do something big with them and with the Church. They believed that God would do what he promised in Scripture. They believed that Jesus meant what he said and that the Holy Spirit would empower and equip Christians to “walk just as he walked.”^[2] The Methodists did not set out to become a separate church or “sect”, as Wesley clearly states. Rather, they set out to be agents of transformation and revival for their world and the church. The transformation they proclaimed and practiced is holiness of heart and life.

Holiness is rarely part of the vernacular or life of The United Methodist Church. We certainly hear the terms “social holiness” and “personal holiness” tossed about. But they are hollow and far removed from the meaning of the Wesley brothers and their followers. For example, when a typical United Methodist speaks of “social holiness” he or she typically refers to how a local congregation or agency is addressing a social issue such as violence, war, hunger, or homelessness. While these were certainly of great concern to John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists, such application of the term “social holiness” would be foreign to them. They understood the term to describe the social character of Christian faith and life; “Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.”^[3]

For Wesley, social holiness meant that Christian faith is deeply personal but it is not private. Christians are responsible for building one another up in love (see John 13:34–35) and for loving their neighbors as themselves (see Luke 10:25–37). One of the problems we face in contemporary Methodism is individualism and the all too common belief that faith is private, a matter between “me and Jesus.” This makes for a rather distorted form of holiness. It puts great constraints on the congregation’s ministry of Christian formation. It is also the reason why most congregations are driven by programs designed to interest individuals in learning about God, faith, spiritual disciplines, and personal development. The problem, however, is that the programs only reach the people who are interested and they are short-term, having little lasting impact on the congregation’s mission and no influence on the local context. This is one way the church reflects the individualistic, consumer culture of North America. Social and personal holiness become little more than simple options in a menu of interests and programs congregations offer to attract and keep members.

If The United Methodist Church has a future, it must once again become a movement that lives to “reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.” We need a new Wesleyan movement within

The United Methodist Church. Such a movement is resident in our DNA. We have the infrastructure needed in *The Book of Discipline*.

Of course, you will find part of our mDNA^[4] in Part III, Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task (¶¶102-141). The mDNA needed for a Wesleyan movement within The United Methodist Church are found in our definition and meaning of membership and ¶¶ 215-221. Paragraph 215 provides the definition of membership in the local church. It describes the two categories: baptized and professing. Baptized members are persons who “have received Christian baptism in the local congregation or elsewhere.” Professing members are persons “who have come into membership by profession of faith.” The paragraph continues, “A baptized or professing member of any local United Methodist church is a member of the global United Methodist connection and a member of the church universal.” Therefore, both baptized and professing members are “full” members of the church. The difference between the two categories is that Baptized members are persons who have not made a public profession of Christian faith, either because they are not able (as in the case of infants or persons with mental disability) or who have been prevented from or chosen to abstain from actively supporting the church’s ministries by their prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Professing members are baptized persons who “make known their desire to live their daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. They covenant together with God and with the members of the local church to keep vows which are a part of the order of confirmation and reception into the Church.”^[5]

Because The United Methodist Church is an *ecclesia* it cannot, nor should, it require or demand the high level of discipline developed by John and Charles Wesley for the members of the early Methodist societies. We have become one of the so-called “Mainline” denominations of the Protestant wing of the Church. Therefore, we must, as our recent marketing slogan suggests, be present to the world with “open hearts, open minds, and open doors.” As this slogan suggests, the church must be open to accept and receive all people as they are. This is, after all, what Jesus did. In Mark 6:30-44 Jesus “saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things (Mark 6:34). After teaching the crowd he fed them, with the help of his disciples. The Baptized members are like the crowd that came to see and hear Jesus in Galilee. They come to him for a multitude of reasons and he accepts and receives them as they are, asking nothing of them. Only after teaching them does Jesus invite them to follow him. The majority of church members will be with the crowd who comes to see and hear Jesus, but are not ready or willing to be his disciples; to follow him and live his way of life in the world.

The church has a responsibility to provide “the nurture that makes possible a comprehensive and life-long process of growing in grace;” toward becoming and living in the world as a Professing member and disciple of Jesus Christ.^[6] I argue above that congregations must develop a system of intentional Christian formation that will provide the instruction, support, and accountability needed to help professing members keep the promises made in the Baptismal Covenant and to grow in holiness of heart and life as disciples of Jesus Christ, and participating in his mission for the world. If there is to be a Wesleyan revival within the church, it will arise among the professing members. They are the people who will lead the church in reclaiming its Wesleyan mDNA.

The professing members of the church are supposed to be accountable for living out their baptismal covenant and participate in the church’s mission in the world. The local congregation may establish minimum standards for professing members, e.g. participation in a small group for support and accountability for practicing the means of grace, regular attendance in weekly worship and the Lord’s Supper, giving in proportion to income (the tithe being a standard goal), participation in service with poor and marginalized people beyond the congregation. Annual evaluation of living out these standards could be done at the end of the year within the small groups. Professing members may then reaffirm their covenant at an annual Covenant Renewal service held on the first Sunday of the year or on Baptism

of the Lord Sunday during which all members are invited to reaffirm the baptismal covenant. Persons who are not able or are unwilling to meet the minimum standards of professing membership will voluntarily remove their names from the professing roll. They will remain baptized members of the church with the understanding that professing membership is always available to them when they are ready. The congregation and its pastoral leaders have a responsibility to nurture such members toward professing membership through Bible study, worship, and pastoral care.

When The United Methodist Church begins to take seriously the meaning of membership through an intentional system of Christian initiation, formation, support and accountability it will rediscover its Wesleyan mDNA. For this to happen it must encourage and support a Wesleyan movement within the church among the professing members by developing a system of mutual support and accountability for following Jesus in the world. What I am proposing will require a significant shift in the culture of the church. Such a shift will, of course, take time and require committed, passionate, and gifted pastoral leadership at all levels of the denomination. I am convinced that Christ is calling us to reclaim our Wesleyan mDNA and to move toward becoming a missional, Christ-centered movement of the Holy Spirit.

In this series of posts I argue that Christians who participate in missional engagement with the world must also be practitioners of their own tradition. They must know who, and whose, they are. I will be so bold as to say that Christians in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition should be able to answer the following questions from Wesley's historic examination:

- Have you faith in Christ?
- Are you going onto perfection?
- Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?
- Are you earnestly striving after it?
- Do you know that General Rules of our church?
- Will you keep them?[7]

Anyone who can answer affirmatively to these questions can be assumed to be a practicing Christian who may be equipped to participate in open and honest dialog and relationship with people of other faith traditions. As practitioners of holiness of heart and life they are equipped to present the gospel to their non-Christian friends, neighbors, co-workers, and acquaintances. They will also likely be good conversation partners and open to work for the common good alongside their non-Christian neighbors.

An obstacle to developing a culture in which holiness thrives is the dominant paradigm that confuses study and programming with discipleship. Experience tells me that it is much easier to get United Methodists to study and discuss Christian theology and practice than it is to get them to actually practice what they learn. Discipleship is often presented as an option in a menu of church programs. It is seldom incorporated into the congregation's missional infrastructure.

What happened during a gathering of active clergy from across a United Methodist annual conference illustrates my point. The purpose of the event was to hear from the bishop, director of connectional ministries, and one another ideas and strategies for navigating an uncertain future for The United Methodist Church. The conference director of connectional ministries gave a twenty-minute presentation focused on the importance of the denominational mission statement:

“To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”[8]

She then instructed everyone to discuss with the people seated at their table the definition of “disciples of Jesus Christ.” The goal of the thirty-minute exercise was to get the clergy discussing with one another how they defined the word “disciple.” Each table was to write their definition on a piece of newsprint. After the allotted time had passed each table was invited to post their newsprint on the wall. We were then instructed to walk around the room to see the various definitions for “disciple.” The first thing that became disconcertingly clear to me was that there was no clear consensus in the room. In fact, there was genuine struggle for many of my clergy colleagues to craft a succinct, coherent definition of who a disciple is. Not a single piece of newsprint posted on the walls of that room contained Wesley’s definition given in “The Character of a Methodist”

A Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;" one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.[9]

I left the event at the end of the day wondering how the congregations of this annual conference can participate in the mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world when their clergy leaders cannot agree on who a disciple is. While all of the pastors in that room had taken the required Methodist history and doctrine courses in seminary or the course of study, none could give John Wesley’s very clear definition of who a Christian is.

One of the reasons for this reality is the many clergy have limited understanding of the nature of discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition. They have been taught in seminary about John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodist societies. They have studied, discussed, and written papers about Wesley’s theology. And they have read the history of Methodism. But by no means all have ever actually put into practice Wesley’s method of Christian formation. Few have participated in a class or band meeting. Fewer still have entertained the idea of introducing Wesley’s method of catechesis and Christian practice into the life of a local congregation. I suspect one reason for this is that John Wesley and the early Methodist movement he and his brother led are required subjects of study. Seminary students read Wesley’s sermons and books about his life and theology and Methodist history. They write papers on Wesleyan soteriology, Christology, ecclesiology, and anthropology. All this is well and good. Persons offering themselves for ordination in The United Methodist Church should be required to learn about the man who led the movement that became the church they hope to serve. Unfortunately, with very few exceptions, does the study of Wesley ever lead to practicing what he did.

Seminaries are very good at teaching the “what” of Wesley and Methodism. The important missing piece is the “how.” Pastors learn about Wesley but they are not taught the organization and practices that made him a great leader in discipleship. We need a renewed emphasis on the practice of Methodism that is integral to the curriculum.[10]

The class and band meetings were essential to the method of Methodism. The interrelated system of small groups formed people into disciples of Jesus Christ. Discipleship was shaped by a simple rule of life (the General Rules) and weekly accountability and support in the small groups (class meeting) guided by a mature, seasoned leader in discipleship (class leader).

Efforts to re-tradition this simple and effective system are routinely neglected by contemporary church leaders. For example, since 1986 the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church has provided resources and staff support for Covenant Discipleship groups and Class Leaders. The goal of this ministry is to help congregations re-tradition the class meeting and the office of class leader. Yet, these resources are routinely ignored by United Methodist schools of theology in their pedagogy and by episcopal leaders in their evaluation of their clergy.

Holiness of heart and life are essential to Christian participation in genuine missional engagement with the world. The Wesleyan Methodist tradition offers a simple, Christ-centered way of helping people to know Christ and grow in love of God and neighbor. Why then do our schools of theology and episcopal leaders do a fine job of teaching *about* Wesley yet

hesitate to train leaders in the basic *practice* of what Wesley did?

[1] Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley, and Others,” in *Works*, 10:845.

[2] 1 John 2:6

[3] Wesley, Sermon 24, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Fourth,” § 1, in *Works*, 1:533.

[4] This is shorthand developed by Alan Hirsch in his book *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. He writes in the book’s glossary: “I have appended the *m* to the letters DNA purely to differentiate it from the biological version—it simply means *missional*DNA. What DNA does for biological systems, mDNA does for ecclesial ones. ... [W]ith this concept/metaphor I hope to explain why the presence of a simple, intrinsic, reproducible, central guiding mechanism is necessary for the reproduction and sustainability of genuine missional movements. As an organism holds together, and each cell understands its function in relation to its DNA, so the church in given contexts finds its reference point in its built-in mDNA (page 282).” My point here is that an essential element of United Methodist mDNA is our doctrine and discipline contained in Part 2 of *The Book of Discipline*. Other pieces are the Standard Sermons, Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament, and the inter-related system of small groups that developed in the early Methodist societies.

[5] See *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2004*, ¶ 217, pages 136–137.

[6] *Ibid.*, see ¶ 216, page 135–136.

[7] *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2012*, ¶336, 262.

[8] *Ibid.*, ¶ 120, 91.

[9] Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” ¶ 5, in *Works*, 9:35

[10] Most United Methodist related schools of theology offer students various extracurricular opportunities to meet in small spiritual formation groups. These groups are certainly beneficial to the students personal spiritual development and learning. Only Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. requires student to enroll in student-led covenant discipleship groups during the first year of study. Students receive academic credit for their participation. However, even at Wesley, the practice of Wesleyan discipleship are not integral the pedagogy of the curriculum. We are not properly teaching Wesley unless the practices that were integral to the Methodist societies are incorporated into the pedagogy.

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