



Love Your Neighbor As Yourself – Part 1 of 6

BY STEVE MANSKAR

This is the first of a six-part series of posts based upon a paper I presented at the Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies in August 2013. The theme of the Institute was to reflect upon how Christians in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition relate to people and communities of other historic faith traditions, or no faith at all.

The Wesleyan emphasis on doctrine and discipline under the guidance of the Holy Spirit equips Christians for genuine interfaith conversation and witness. The paper argues that when congregations expect, encourage, and equip members to grow in holiness of heart and life they prepare them for Christ-like encounters with their neighbors who practice other religions, or no religion.

Part 1 of 6:

The 21st century is a post-modern, multi-cultural, multi-religious world. It is a world characterized by globalization and diversity. The global economy is a world marked by migration in which people leave home and travel around the world in the hope of making a better life for themselves. This is a world foreign to the one I was born into.

I was born in the middle of the 20th century into an American culture that was assumed to be “Christian.” And to be Christian was essential to being American. The Church held a place of prominence and honor in daily life and popular culture. Everyone spoke English and saw little reason to learn a second language. Born into a Methodist family, I was baptized as an infant. The church I grew up in saw little need for intentional Christian formation because it was assumed the culture in which we lived would work in concert with the church to form good citizens who, as a matter of course, would be Christians.

The world I grew up in was the last gasps of Christendom. While there are vestiges of it today, Christendom is no longer the dominant paradigm of Western culture. The Church continues to have a place in the cultural conversation, but it is no longer a dominant voice. It is one voice among many.^[1] This is revealed by the growing number of communities that annually provide public space to display religious and non-religious displays during the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas.^[2] On December 24, 2011 National Public Radio reported a story from Leesburg, Virginia about how each December the local county courthouse traditionally hosted a Nativity scene. Local Christian congregations provided the annual display. However, the practice was challenged in court by local non-Christian residents as being a violation of the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The court agreed and instructed the county to allow other, non-religious displays alongside the traditional Nativity. The NPR story tells how county officials decided to resolve the issue. They provided ten plots around the courthouse square for holiday displays. Most were claimed by local atheist groups and included a diverse array of displays intended to mock religious symbols.

What happened in Leesburg, Virginia is repeated across the country. While Christianity remains the majority religion in the United States, it is no longer the dominant influence in popular culture or thinking it once was. Christianity in North America is living on the fumes of a Christendom that ran out of fuel decades ago. Many Christian leaders understand this new reality. They tend to lead independent, non-denominational churches. Unfortunately, the so-called “Mainline”^[3] denominations continue to operate out of a Christendom paradigm. They do so at their peril. To do

so leaves the church ill equipped to communicate and live the gospel of Jesus Christ in today's post-Christendom, post-modern, multi-religious culture.

Typical United Methodist congregations leave their members ill equipped to communicate and live the gospel of Jesus Christ in contemporary culture because they discount the importance of holiness of heart and life. Christendom thinking assumes that Christianity continues to be the dominant voice and influence in the world. It even goes so far as to claim the United States is a "Christian" nation. It logically follows that holiness is equated with good citizenship. Being a good, loyal citizen of the nation is the definition of a Christian; Church, State, and Culture are all partners in forming the character of the people.[4]

The problem with such Christendom thinking is that it denies the significant cultural shifts that have occurred and will continue. It is also contrary to the nature of holiness found in Scripture that John Wesley and the early Methodists understood very well. Wesley defined holiness as being cleansed from sin, 'from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit', and by consequence the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus, the being so 'renewed in the image of our mind' as to be 'perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect'.^[5] To be "holy" is to be set apart, to be different. Striving to "have the mind of Christ" sets Christians apart from the world. More specifically, holiness is marked by who and how Christians love.

Wesley believed holiness is a life-long journey. It is a process of intentional growth that involves the formation of "holy tempers:" love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Galatians 5:22-23). The eventual outcome of striving toward holiness is becoming fully the person God created you to be, in the image of Christ. Christians who intentionally and persistently practice and pursue holiness become more and more like Jesus.

Wesley anticipated the state in which The United Methodist Church finds itself today in the opening paragraph of his "Thoughts Upon Methodism" written in 1786:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.^[6]

In its pursuit of cultural relevance the denomination has intentionally set aside "the doctrine, spirit, and discipline" Wesley regarded as essential to Methodist identity and mission. The importance of doctrine, spirit, and discipline are downplayed for fear that United Methodists may be perceived as being exclusive.

United Methodist congregations, with their emphasis on inclusiveness and openness, tend to conflate holiness with citizenship.^[7] This means the body politic is the primary subject of Christian love rather than the triune God. God remains an important presence, but is secondary to "open doors, open hearts, and open minds." An important virtue fostered by United Methodist congregations, therefore, is a virtue they frequently name "social holiness."^[8] At the heart of this virtue is inclusiveness of all people at all levels of the church and society. It also includes the struggle for social and economic justice. Much emphasis is placed on the importance of human agency in "building the kingdom of God." The church is understood to be God's agent given the task and responsibility for building the kingdom of God. The end result of equating holiness with citizenship is a people whose lives reflect the very best values of the surrounding culture.

This leads to a culture of self-preoccupation. David Lowes Watson astutely describes the North American church:

Instead of places where people come to be formed as Christian disciples, congregations then become places where people are primarily concerned with being helped and blessed. Instead of finding how they can serve the risen Christ in the world, proclaiming and living out the coming reign of God, they begin to look for ways in which they themselves can be enriched by God's love and peace and justice. And even when they do make a serious attempt to form themselves into Christian disciples, they will tend to focus on the development of personal spiritual growth to the neglect of helping Jesus Christ with the unfinished task of preparing the world for God's coming shalom.[9]

Watson argues that The United Methodist Church is thoroughly *enculturated*. By this he means the church is a reflection of the culture in which it resides. "Instead of presenting the world with the gospel, the church adjusts the gospel to whatever the world finds important." [10] Hence, marketing and consumerism are dominant influences both inside and outside the church. Church pastors and staff are regarded as providers of religious goods and services. Church members are the chief consumers who go to the church expecting to be served.

Congregational leaders are guided by what Juan Luis Segundo calls the General Rule of Pastoral Prudence, "The absolute minimum in obligations in order to keep the maximum number of people." [11] Pastors who are now required to report attendance and membership figures every Monday morning are unlikely to challenge this market-driven, consumer culture.

Therefore, United Methodist congregations are filled by people John Wesley regarded to be "almost Christian." [12] They are outwardly Christian, participating in worship, church programs and activities, doing good works in community, and are generally good, decent, responsible citizens. However, their Christianity is often only skin deep. Their religious beliefs are more akin to what Kenda Creasy Dean calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) than historic Christianity.

The guiding beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism are:

- A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die. [13]

MTD is the result of decades of downplaying what Wesley regarded as essential Christian doctrine and discipline. Congregations de-emphasize doctrine in order to present themselves as being inclusive, open to all, and welcoming to people of no faith and non-Christian religions.

The United Methodist Church's recent marketing tag line, "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors: the People of The United Methodist Church" is a prime example. It implies that United Methodist congregations are open to all expressions of faith, all ideas, and all people. The slogan intentionally downplays the denomination's historic identity in Jesus Christ and his mission. It deliberately sets Jesus aside in order to convince the world that openness and inclusiveness are the denomination's most important values.

Every church should have open hearts, minds, and doors. Inclusiveness is an important attribute of the church. The doors of the church must be open to everyone. The hearts and minds of the people should be open to accept and love all people as they are. We need also to understand that true, universal inclusiveness and openness are possible only when Jesus Christ is Lord of the church. Such virtue is possible only when hearts are open to his grace and the power of the

Holy Spirit to work through each life to make open hearts, minds, and doors a genuine reality. This means that the church must understand that true inclusiveness and openness are the fruit of a people who pursue holiness of heart and life.

As admirable as inclusiveness is, when it replaces holiness as the *telos* of the church we end up with a people who possess little or no understanding of basic Christian doctrine or discipline. This renders them to be poor conversation partners with their Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Mormon, Unitarian, or atheist co-workers, neighbors, and friends.

To illustrate my point, I share an encounter I had in an adult Sunday School class in a United Methodist congregation in Nashville, Tennessee. During the course of the class' conversation Jim told everyone about a new friend he met at his place of work. His new friend is Muslim. Jim told us about how his co-worker told him about his Islamic beliefs and practices. Jim spoke about how inspired he was with his new friend's deeply held faith. He is particularly drawn to his friend's discipline of prayer five times a day. Jim concluded by wistfully telling the class that he wished Christians had such a discipline that he could practice.

I took the opportunity to tell Jim, and the class, that Christians have an ancient tradition of daily prayer know as the Daily Office. John and Charles Wesley practiced a discipline of prayer at least three times a day: morning, evening, and night. They encouraged Methodists to join them in the same practice. In addition, Methodists had the tradition of weekly small group (classes) and society meetings that included prayer, praise, Scripture reading, teaching, and accountability for discipleship. All of this was new to Jim and everyone else in the class.

Jim was baptized into The United Methodist Church as an infant and confirmed as a youth. He was active in his UMYF group during high school and graduated from a United Methodist affiliated college. Today he is an active member, and leader, in the same congregation in which he grew up. Jim had no knowledge or experience of Wesleyan discipleship, in spite of his life-long affiliation with The United Methodist Church.

I am highlighting his story because, in my experience working with numerous United Methodist congregations, districts, and annual conferences in my work as Director of Wesleyan Leadership for the General Board of Discipleship, Jim is a typical church member. He is a good man who does his best to make a positive contribution to his church and community. Jim is highly intelligent and articulate when talking about his work, hobbies, sports that interest him, and politics. But when asked to discuss his faith or to explain basic Christian doctrine, he is speechless. Jim knows he believes in God and Jesus is his personal Savior. But he is not able to go much further. Jim has been taught that being a Christian means being a good citizen, being nice to others, and going to heaven when you die. Holiness is not part of his vocabulary. In fact, he is repelled by the word because he associates it with fundamentalism and people he perceives to be judgmental and "holier-than-thou."

In the next five posts I intend to argue that a life steeped in Christian faith and the practices that lead to holiness of heart and life is a pre-requisite for honest, faithful dialog and relationship with people of non-Christian religious traditions and who profess no faith. I am part of a denomination that publically declares itself to be a people of "Open hearts, Open doors, Open minds." At the same time it has forsaken its historic pursuit of holiness of heart and life, the very same holiness that enables hearts, doors, and minds to be truly open to others. For interfaith dialog to be a conversation participants must be deeply rooted in their respective traditions. Otherwise, the dialog becomes a monologue. When people like Jim, whose faith has been formed much more by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism than historic, Scriptural Christianity, encounter a co-worker who is a practicing, devout Muslim, Jim is not equipped to engage in genuine interfaith dialogue. He is very proud of having an open heart and open mind, but he has very little to offer his Muslim friend who may have questions about Christian faith and practices.

[1] Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 10–11

[2] See <http://www.npr.org/2011/12/24/144151483/secular-opponents-of-holiday-displays-get-creative>

[3] These are historically American Protestant denominations that were dominant players in US culture and politics during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Denominations typically identified as “Mainline” are The United Methodist Church, The Episcopal Church, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), The Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, and Reformed Church in America.

[4] Stone, 118–119.

[5] John Wesley, Sermon 17, “The Circumcision of the Heart,” § I.1, in *Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 1 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976–), 402–403.

[6] John Wesley, Thoughts Upon Methodism (1786), ¶ 1, in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert Davies, vol. 9 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976—), 527.

[7] The denominational marketing campaign known for the catch phrase, “Open Doors, Open Hearts, Open Minds: The People of The United Methodist Church” is a prime example of equating inclusiveness with holiness. The United Methodist Church, therefore, is no different than an any public institution (school, library, or civic organization).

[8] Wesley’s use of the phrase, “social holiness”, is broader than the way it is commonly used today. For Wesley social holiness means both that Christianity is necessarily a relational religion requiring participation in Christian community. Secondly, social holiness expands the relational nature of Christian faith beyond the Christian community and into the world. He describes his meaning in the preface to a Collection of Psalms and Hymns published in 1739: “Holy solitaires” is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. “Faith working by love” is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. “This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also;” and that we manifest our love “by doing good unto all men; especially to them that are of the household of faith.” And in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren, not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be “zealous of good works.” He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them. “My Father,” will he say, “worketh hitherto, and I work.” And at all possible opportunities he is, like his Master, “going about doing good.”

[9] David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 26.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid, 28.

[12] This is a reference to Sermon 2: “The Almost Christian”, in which Wesley asserts the difference between an “almost Christian” and an “altogether Christian” is whole-hearted faith in Christ crucified and risen. This faith compels the altogether Christian to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and to love those whom God

loves, even their enemies and the enemies of God. Such faith is described by Charles Wesley as “Active faith that lives within, Conquers earth, and hell, and sin, Sanctifies, and makes us whole, Forms the Savior in the soul.”

^[13] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What The Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

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