

## *Editorial Note: Aldersgate Time*

1988 is Aldersgate year. Methodists and other Wesleyans remember, celebrate and praise Wesley's experience on the evening of May 24, 1738. To the surprise of many, Wesley suddenly seems to be "in." During the latter part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, there emerged Wesley "biographies" both here and there, with contents more hagiographical than biographical. Around the middle of our century the reaction was clear: John Wesley was slowly relegated to the dark chambers of dust and forgottenness. When I, in the early sixties, did graduate work in the theology of John Wesley at one of the United Methodist Universities which had excellent collections of Wesley material, we were only three working in that area, none of us American. Today, however, a new generation of young Wesley scholars are emerging in the U.S. Celebrations such as mentioned above, are no longer frowned upon. What has happened? Does John Wesley have anything to contribute to our lives as Christians today? Or, as others may say, have we fallen prey to the pleasant attractions of romanticized hagiography--although we appear to have lost the much condemned (by some) and praised (by others) triumphalism that seemed to be firmly yoked with the hagiographical emphasis?

I wrote twenty years ago:

Modern Methodism, for all practical purposes, must be considered Pelagian, with little spiritual power and very limited intercourse with God in the lives of the individuals. The sacraments have become "empty," mere signs; the Word has lost the high place it should have in the devotional life of the believer, and prayer has often become purely formalistic or non-existent. On the background of such a situation, which, of course, will admit of exceptions, the need for a rediscovery of Wesley's basic emphasis is urgently needed. The basic lack of God-given-spiritual power will demand that the means of grace again be given, not reverence, but a dynamic function in the common, as well as in the private, life. Only through a disciplined use of these means, springing out of hearts longing to see their people and their church arise with new spiritual vigor, can the great task of renewal be made possible. Wesley's emphasis upon God's work and initiative, coupled with man's responsibility, will serve as a much-needed corrective to our self-sufficient, middle-class, work righteousness.

I do not think I would say anything different if I had to write on the same topic today. I would just add that this concerns not only Methodism, but also other expressions of the Christian faith.

I believe Wesley is highly relevant for us today, for several reasons. First, his theology is a “theology of the center”: He keeps in a fruitful tension and balance such key doctrines as sanctification/justification; spiritual/practical; personal/communal; the need for spiritual experience/the necessity for using the means of grace; practical, concrete life/a holy life; God’s grace/human works and response; and much more.

Secondly, perhaps more importantly, we must recapture the preaching of and the witnessing to sin and grace, God’s forgiving love, and our grateful response in commitment to Jesus Christ as our Lord. As a consequence, the longing search for the fullness of this grace must emerge as holiness, our being sanctified through faith, which again is working through love, in service to God and neighbor.

Finally, if we are to avoid the shoals of neglect, indifference or, as Wesley called it, “enthusiasm” (fanaticism, i.e., believing one can reach the goal without the means), and escape the dark caves of closed sacerdotalism, we’d better pay close attention to Wesley’s guidance.

I also wrote 20 years ago:

Without a recovery, not necessarily of the conceptual framework and practice, but of the substance of Wesley’s theology of the sacraments and the means of grace, the future of the Methodist Church as the living body of Christ is rather doubtful....The distinction between “evangelicalism and ‘sacramentalism’ must never be applied to Wesley. For him these two aspects were one, and later Methodism has paid dearly for tearing apart what God has united.”

Is John Wesley relevant for today? Yes, indeed, he is.

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