Our Wesleyan Heritage After Two Centuries

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What Kind of Ministry Will Sustain the Heritage?

When The Federal Convention met in 1787 to design a framework for the government of the United States, competing economic interests and conflicting political ideas made it extremely difficult for the delegates to get on with their task. There were those who wanted to continue the loose relationships between the states as provided for in the Articles of Confederation. There were those who, at the other end of the gamut, wanted to establish a limited monarchy. Finally, after much wrangling and many a near-failure, the constitution was completed and made ready for submission to the states for their ratification. According to a story that has come down the years, on the day when the convention completed its history-making task, Benjamin Franklin, on emerging from the chamber where the delegates had been sweating over their job, was accosted by a curious woman who asked, "Well, Mr. Franklin, what form of government do we have?" To which Franklin replied, somewhat bluntly, "A republic, madam, a republic—if you can keep it!"

The implications of that crisp comment are numerous and searching. The existence of truth is never precisely the same as its effectiveness: to be effective it must be articulate and relevant. The presence of traditions is never the same as their potency: to be potent they must be continuously sifted and nourished and strengthened. The beginning of great movements, whether political, social, or spiritual, is never the same as their ongoing: if they are to live on, they must return again and again to the sources from which they sprang and adapt themselves to the new circumstances and the fresh challenges which they will inevitably face.

Those who cherish any worthy tradition have at least a threefold obligation: (1) an obligation to the past in gratitude, (2) an obligation to themselves in honor, and (3) an obligation to their contemporaries in articulation. This responsibility rests upon all those who stand, avowedly, within the broad tradition of Arminianism as refined and enriched by the total thought and practice of the Wesleyan movement in 18th Century England. For obvious reasons it rests acutely upon the clergy in all our contemporary groups where Wesleyanism may be said to be doctrinally regulative.

It is pertinent, therefore, to ask: What kind of ministry will be worthy of our heritage? What sort of preaching and pastoral strategies will maintain and enrich the tradition we hold dear?

I.

It must be theologically distinctive without being fraternally exclusive. In 1938 Methodism celebrated the 200th anniversary of John Wesley’s Aldersgate Street experience of the “strangely warmed” heart. As part of the celebration there was published, on May 19, a commemorative edition of the “The Christian Advocate.” In it was an article by Dr. Harold Paul Sloan, entitled "The Methodist Message—What Is It?" Consider the following paragraph which I have excerpted from the article:

"Methodism, as a part of the Universal Church, and standing in that splendid tra-
dition of St. Paul, St. Augustine, Luther, Wesley, preaches the common Christianity of the centuries. It has, however, four characteristic accents, namely:

Justice by faith alone
The true freedom of human personality
The doctrine of the pure heart
The witness of the Spirit or assurance."

What strikes me as being at once noteworthy and praiseworthy in Dr. Sloan’s statement is the fine way in which it combines the two dimensions of breadth and depth. Its breadth may be seen in the acknowledgement that Wesleyanism holds a vast amount of common ground with all other believers and groups of believers in the universal Christian Church. Its depth may be discovered in the insistence upon certain articulations of the faith, certain emphases in doctrine, which are sufficiently valid and distinctive to command the loyalty of those who hold to this tradition and to challenge the respect of those who are removed from it. Here is balance—and blessed are the balanced!

Consider another illustration this time, from a source quite different from a magazine article by a Methodist editor. Dr. H. O. Wiley is almost certainly the foremost theologian of the Church of the Nazarene. In his three-volume Christian Theology, expounding the doctrine of “entire sanctification,” he says: “All evangelical Christians hold that it is a Bible doctrine, that it includes freedom from sin, that it is accomplished through the merits of Christ’s death, and that it is the heritage of those who are already believers. They differ widely, however, as to its nature and the time of its attainment.” Again you have the two dimensions of breadth and depth—the ecumenical and departmental, the universal and the particular.

One day, at a camp meeting dedicated to the promotion of holiness among believers, a lady came to me with a disturbed mind. She said: “Do you realize that there are some people attending these services who don’t believe as we do regarding the doc-

trine of holiness?” She clearly implied that some measures should be adopted to run them off the grounds. I am afraid I disappointed her by saying, “Let us thank God they are with us. It gives us a chance to show them what we have in Christ and thus convince them that they may have it, too.”

Too often, whether Wesleyans or non-Wesleyans, we have confused theological belief with theological belligerency. To hold truth with conviction is commendable. To hold it with phrasical pride and pugilism is condemnable. To hold it within a framework of confraternity with all men who are sincerely trusting Christ as Saviour and Lord is admirable. To these sentiments John Wesley, I think, would have subscribed. At any rate he left this for the record:

I would to God that all men knew that I, and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men by any but the common principles of Christianity. It is plain, old Christianity that I teach, renouncing and detesting all other marks of distinction. But from real Christians, of whatever denomination, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all: not from any who sincerely follow after what they know they have not yet attained. “Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.”

It thus appears, in my view of the matter, that a ministry worthy of the Wesleyan tradition should be theologically distinctive without being fraternally exclusive.

II.

There is a second conviction which I would share with those who feel any serious obligation to preserve and vitalize the Wesleyan heritage: ours must be a ministry that is Biblically illuminating without being badly dogmatic. According to the first Psalm, the “blessed” man is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates therein “day and night.” Probably no man ever lived to whom those words more truly apply than to John Wes-


\[\text{Quoted from Turnbull, Ralph G., A Minister’s Obstacles, p. 113.}\]
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ley. Quite as much could be said for John Fletcher and Adam Clarke.

As for Wesley, W. E. Sangster, an acknowledged authority on Wesleyana, says: "Bible study was a habit formed in him in childhood and a daily—and almost hourly—occupation to the end of his long life." In his Plain Account of Christian Perfection he quoted the Scriptures one hundred and ninety-five times. In all his writings there are the unmistakable evidences of a mind steeped in the text and tenor of the Holy Word.

"O give me that book!" was his cry. "At any price give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me homo unius libri."

Now I have met earnest people—some of them ministers—who quoted this word of Wesley's with a kind of obscurantist gusto, as though Wesley was content to take the King James translation of the Scriptures and, ruling out the services of all other books and all other interpreting minds, would let any verse of Scripture stand on equal footing with any other verse.

How far that is from the truth may be judged by these words which appear in the same paragraph in which he cries, "Let me be a man of one book."

Does anything appear dark or intricate...Thou hast said, "If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know." I am willing to do; let me know Thy will. I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.

Or, take the following, which appears in the general Preface to his Works:

In this edition, I present to serious and candid men, my last and maturest thoughts...I hope, to Scripture, Reason, and Christian Antiquity.

Note the order: (1) the revealed Word, (2) the interpreting mind, and (3) the correcting or confirming effect of the collective testimony of the Christian Church, particularly (in Wesley's case) the church of the first three centuries when it was closest to Christ and the apostles.

Or, this from a sermon on "Charity":

We know all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is therefore true and right concerning all things. But we know, likewise, that there are some Scriptures which more immediately commend themselves to every man's conscience.

It is clear, if I apprehend the matter with any accuracy, that Mr. Wesley, while holding so high a view of the Bible that he unqualifiedly proclaimed it as "the only rule, and the sufficient rule, of our faith and practices," stood for a dynamic rather than a dogmatic use of the Scriptures.

What do they teach in their total bearing upon a given matter? What confirmation of their truth do we find in the experiences of men, or, if not in their actual experiences, in their collective insights? These are the questions that Mr. Wesley would have found most agreeable to his mind.

From this conclusion two suggestions may be drawn. The first is exegetical, the second practical. Recently there came to my desk a magazine which circulates among fundamentalists who relish a belligerent and speculative approach to prophecy. In it was a leading article on the atomic bomb and its relation to the second coming of our Lord. For a proof text Matthew 24:15, 16 was cited. The verse reads, "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place (whoso readeth, let him understand:) then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains." The writer had doctored those verses in such a way as to get the following: "When ye shall see the a-bom(b)ination....flee into the mountains." Extreme, you say. Yes, but it nevertheless illustrates a way of using Scripture from which Mr. Wesley

*Sangster, W. E., The Path to Perfection, p.33.
*Wesley, John, Sermons, Preface for year 1746.
would have recoiled with vehemence. That Holy Scripture contains un plumbed depths of mystery is true enough, but this is no reason why we should treat it as a crossword puzzle. It is a revelation but it is not an ouija-board.

The practical reflection which is suggested by Mr. Wesley's use of Scripture is this: leave room in your mind for growth—both expansive and corrective—in your understanding of the Word. Wesley, for example, never ceased to lay heavy stress on the doctrine of the believer's assurance with respect to his salvation. Yet over a period of fifty years he shifted his view from an extreme to a median position. He confesses in one of his later sermons that a half-century earlier he and other Methodists were wont to ask people, "Do you know that your sins are pardoned?" If the answer was "No," the immediate reply was, "Then you are a child of the devil."

That species of extreme dogmatism failed to make allowance, let us say, for some eclipse of the Spirit's clear witness by what Peter calls an experience of "hveness through manifold temptations." (1 Peter 1:6) Wesley therefore goes on to say:

We preach assurance, as we always did, as a common privilege of the children of God, but we do not enforce it under the pain of damnation denounced on all who do not enjoy it.

This attempt to make clear what I mean by a plea for a ministry that is biblically illuminating without being baldly, rigidly dogmatic, may well conclude with a sentence or two from P. T. Forsyth's Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind. The first chapter is called "The Preacher and His Charter." It discusses the minister's use of the Bible. Says Forsyth:

We do not treat the Bible aright; we do not treat it with the respect it asks for itself, when we treat it as a theologian, but only when we treat it as an apostle, as a preacher, as the preacher in the perpetual pulpit of the Church. It is saturated with dogma, but its writers were not dogmatists; and it concerns a church, but they were not ecclesiastics. The Bible, the preacher, and the Church were all made by the same thing—the Gospel. The Gospel was there before the Bible, and it created the Bible, as it creates the true preacher and the true sermon everywhere.

III.

There is a third requisite for a ministry that is to give worthy support to the Wesleyan tradition: it must be penetratingly personal without being socially sterile. Dr. Harold Cooke Phillips says that his mother used to tell of a pious grocer whose living quarters were upstairs over his place of business. On occasion he would call down to his clerk and say: "James."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you watered the milk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you pumpkined the butter?"

"Yes, sir."

"And put chicory in the coffee?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then come up to worship."

The illustration may be extreme, but the danger it points up is as old as the time when Pharisees made their religion consist in a narrowly personal conformity to ceremonial requirements without regard for social obligations. Far back of that, of course, is the spectacle of a Jacob who says his prayers and swindles his father-in-law.

Even where piety is personally sincere it is not always socially sensitive. This tendency to let fly apart what God hath joined together finds a most unhappy illustration in the present Protestant scene. Contemporary Protestant Christianity, with its splits between liberals and conservatives, "modernists" and "fundamentalists," has almost ceased to be spherical—as New Testament Christianity should be—and has become hemispherical. Or, to change the figure, we have taken the so-called "personal gospel" and the so-called "social gospel," led them into the ring, put gloves on them, and told them to "slug it out." It is an ungodly tragedy!

A few years ago Sam Shoemaker wrote an excellent book called The Church Can Save the World. The title is unfortunate,
for it implies a certain view of eschatology that would prejudice some of us against it. Nevertheless, it is a book with a tremendously timely and trenchant message. In it Dr. Shoemaker says: "We suffer today from two mistakes of the past: those who created true experience but did not know how to relate it to the needs of the world, and those who sought to relate experience which they had not known how to create." Dr. Shoemaker is right.

Take a case in point. Recently, while rereading A History of Social Thought, by my old professor, Dr. Emory S. Bogardus, I came across his summary of the resolutions on industrial democracy which were adopted when the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America was organized in Philadelphia in 1908. In these resolutions the member churches were urged to promote the following principles: "(1) the principle of arbitration in industrial dissensions, (2) the adequate protection of workers in hazardous trades, (3) the abolition of child labor, (4) the safeguarding of physical and moral health of women in industry, (5) the suppression of the 'sweat-laboring system,' (6) the reduction of the hours of labor to the lowest practicable point, (7) a living wage in all industries, (8) one day of rest in seven for all workers, (9) the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised, (10) suitable provisions for old age or disability of workers, and (11) the abatement of poverty."

Be it noted in passing that these principles were regarded as radical four decades ago. In our ears today they sound almost tame. But that is beside the point. The regrettable truth is that most of the Protestant leaders who took a stand for these excellent social objectives were at that very hour the beguiled victims of an optimistic liberalism which led them to shout down anything so old-fashioned as individual regeneration and to play up in its place the fair idol of "religious education."

How much better was the synthesis of the personal and the social which characterized the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, of which Mr. Wesley was at once the spearhead and symbol! The preaching of Wesley and his colleagues was in the first instance penetratingly personal. H. H. Farmer of Cambridge says of true preaching that "It is God actively probing me, challenging my will, calling on me for decision, through the only medium which the nature of His purpose permits him to use, the medium of a personal relationship." Precisely that was the Wesleyan pattern of preaching. Witness his sermon on "The Great Assize." It closes with rapier-like thrusts at the individual soul. "How will ye escape?" asks this one-time frigid pedant who has become an incendiary prophet. "Will ye call on the mountains to fall on you, the rocks to cover you. Can you prevent the sentence? Blind wretch! Vain hope! Lo, hell is moved from beneath to receive those who are ripe for destruction. And the everlasting doors lift up their heads, that the heirs of glory may come in." Here, you see, is preaching that ends not in a rhetorical mist but in a formidable and focused assault upon the conscience and the will.

Yet the same Wesley who preached sermons as intensely and personally evangelical as that was the Wesley who preached solid, searching sermons on "The Use of Money" and "The Reformation of Manners" and who wrote powerful tracts against the slave trade and the liquor traffic. The result of this synthesis was revival in the hearts of men plus reformation in the habit-patterns and the social attitudes of men.

Wesley knew that social programs, however idealistically conceived, will be no better than the men who put them into action. He knew that to trade off the selfish greed of one man who calls himself a capitalist for the selfish greed of another man who calls himself a socialist means no gain to society and no cure for its ills. At the same time Mr. Wesley was statesman enough to

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*Bogardus, A History of Social Thought, p. 461.

"Farmer, The Servant of the Word, pp. 25f."
realize that even a Christian conscience needs enlightenment and Christian motives need implementation. Hence his plain, powerful directives to the people called Methodists, summoning them to harness the energies of God’s saving grace to the common good.

How well he succeeded may be judged, in part, by a significant sentence or two tucked away in Elie Halevy’s *History of the English People*: “The majority of the leaders of the great trade union movement that would arise in England within a few years of 1815 will belong to the Non-conformist sects. They will often be local preachers, that is, practically speaking ministers. Their spiritual ancestors were the founders of Methodism."

A ministry worthy of a tradition like that must, I contend, be penetratingly personal without being socially sterile.

IV.

A fourth requirement for a ministry adequate to our heritage might be stated thus: *it must be ruthlessly realistic without being categorically pessimistic.*

It must be realistic about the contemporary impotence of the church, that is, of organized religion. When John Wesley got awake himself, as he did at Aldersgate, he became vividly aware of the deadly conventionalism and the imposture of the Anglicanism of his day. We need a dose of that awareness as we assess the piffling irrelevancy of much that passes for religion today. The caustic diagnosis of a Bernard Iddings Bell is not out of order. He opens one of his recent books with the flat charge that “The Christian church has today for the most part ceased to have any influence worth mentioning over human affairs, particularly on men who think and lead.”

Revival always begins in the realism of self-examination—the conviction of sin.

It must be realistic, moreover, in its appraisal and application of techniques. This was eminently characteristic of Mr. Wes-


Here, perhaps, two words of caution should be dropped: the immature spiritual counsellor, making use of psychiatric principles, is in danger of becoming morbid in his approach to people’s problems. He knows there are such things as rationalizations, complexes, projections, hidden guilts. If he is not careful he will suspect everybody of being “off the beam.” He will regard every counsellor as covering up something. It is never a healthy sign when a minister spends an undue amount of time denouncing “secret sin,” an “Achan in the camp,” and that sort of thing. He himself may be in need not of an amateur but of a rated psychiatrist.

Realism without pessimism—let that be our quest. The church may be but a pale shadow of what it ought to be, but the sources of divine renewal are as exhaustless and available as ever. Some methods that have been rendered sacrosanct by past usage may need overhauling, but that should neither frighten us nor deter us. The Pauline precedent is clear: “all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” (I Corinthians 9:22).

V.

Let me suggest, finally, that a ministry that will match our Wesleyan heritage must rely upon the energy of the Holy Spirit without cancelling out the responsibility of the human spirit. It is well known that Mr. Wesley made a careful and interested study of the mystics—Jacob Boehme, Archbishop Fenelon, Thomas a Kempis, Madame Guyon, and others. He learned much from them, just as any student of mysticism should. Nevertheless, he had clear insights into the dangers that lie in wait for the mystic: the tendency to withdraw from the world instead of living the life of sanctity before the world and in behalf of the world, the proneness to slight the means of grace and the place of good works, the flair for visions as having higher authority than the revelation of the mind and purpose of God in the Scriptures.

Out of this process of study and reflection came the John Wesley who balanced the mystical and the practical. His emphasis upon spiritual experience had a certain mysticism at its core—the human soul and God in direct contact. His emphasis upon the final guidance of the Scriptures, to which each believing heart must respond with the best understanding he has, was a practical safeguard against all sorts of unregulated and untested emotionalism. Wesley was a practical mystic. That is what every minister should be.

Listen now to Wesley in his comments on I Corinthians 14:32:

“For the spirit of the prophets is subject unto the prophets”—but what enthusiast considers this? The impulses of the Holy Spirit, even in men really inspired, so suit themselves to their rational faculties as not to divest them of the government of themselves, like the heathen priests under their diabolical possessions. Evil spirits threw their prophets into such ungovernable ecstacies, as forced them to speak and act like madmen. But the Spirit of God left his prophets the clear use of their judgment, when and how long it was fit for them to speak, and never hurried them into improprieties, either as to matter, manner, or time of their speaking.”

Brethren, we can scarcely make too much of the sovereign place and power of the Holy Spirit in our ministry. It is He who has called us. It is He who quickened us into living with our redeeming Lord. It is He who gives true unction to the sermon we deliver. It is He who gives harvest to the seed we sow. It is He who one day will testify to our faithfulness before the face of our Master and Lord.

But remember—by all the pains of ministerial fumbling and failure, by all the honor of ministerial effectiveness remember—that God the Holy Spirit can do none of these things without a dedicated and disciplined response from you. The Holy Spirit is not given to overwhelm our personality; He is given to overspread it. He is not bestowed to by-pass our abilities, but to bless them. Divine energy working through human responsibility—that is the secret of every great and growing ministry in every generation. “He maketh his ministers a flame of fire”—there is the energy. Stir up the gift of God that is in you,” or,
as the Revised Standard Version has it, "rekindle the gift of God that is within you"—there is the responsibility. "Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you"—there is the energy. "Study to shew thyself approved unto God"—there is the responsibility.

Brothers, the heritage that descends to us from the glowing yesterdays is a shining one. Not everything about it, or about those who created it, was pleasing to God. All our idols have feet of clay—including a John Wesley. Yet nothing can obscure the glory of the legacy that has been bequeathed to us. I have pointed out the lines along which, in my earnest view of the matter, you and I can take this heritage and match it against this tremendous hour in the world's life. There are doctrinal distinctives which we dare not hide or soften, but we can affirm them without theological snobbishness. The personal penetration of the gospel into the lives of men must be our first concern, but it must never be divorced from those ethical sensitivities that enable us to relate the new life in Christ to the community in which we work and play. There is this incomparable Book which will remain to the end, both for ourselves and those to whom we preach, the one sufficient guide for "faith and practice," but which it is our business to present in its total message as a revelation that is as relevant as it is reliable. There is a realism which compels us to deal honestly and without illusion with the paralysis of the contemporary church, the appalling paganism of society, and the perils that exist within our own lives as ministers; yet, threading these realistic insights, is the undiscourageable faith which sees the possibilities of revival that may always be realized when man's penitence rises to embrace God's availability. And, finally, there is the unremitting necessity of taking all we can offer for the ministry—the caliber of our minds, the amleness of our education, the thoroughness of our study, the training of our voices—and handing it over to God for Him to ignite it with the torch of His Spirit and use it to the glory of His name.

And now, thinking not so much of the past whence our heritage has come as of the future when we shall give an account of our stewardship, let me relate an incident which I first read in a book by James S. Stewart. The late Bishop Charles Gore of the Anglican Church, says Dr. Stewart, was holding a private service with a class of candidates for full orders in the ministry. The next day they would be formally ordained. Coming to the close of his heart-to-heart talk, Bishop Gore searched the eyes of these young men as he said: "Tomorrow I shall say to you, Wilt thou, Wilt thou, Wilt thou? But there will come a day to you when Another will say to you, Hast thou, Hast thou, Hast thou? What will your answer be?