

Philip R. Meadows

*The Spirit of Methodism: Missionary Zeal
and the Gift of an Evangelist*

Abstract:

The church does not need more vital congregations, but rather a few vital Christians, whose vitality is not measured in terms of institutional effectiveness, but by missionary zeal. This zeal is a hungering and thirsting for just one thing: the glory of God and the salvation of souls. It cannot be manufactured, but can be caught from those who have been gifted by the Spirit to continue the charism of their founder, and fanned into flame. Without this type of Christian, there is no movement, and there is no Methodism. John Wesley's most important legacy was not his doctrine or his discipline but a movement of zealous preachers and people who put flesh on the way of scriptural holiness. This paper explores the nature of that legacy and the spiritual zeal it fostered. This paper concludes that this same "spirit" is available to all who would commit to the doctrine and discipline of the Methodist movement. A version of this paper was delivered before the faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary to conclude the formal installation of the author in the Sundo Kim Chair of Evangelism on December 4, 2018.

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Philip R. Meadows is the Sundo Kim Professor of Evangelism in the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary.

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. This will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out. (John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Methodism*)¹

Introduction

Just five years before his death, at the age of eighty-three, Wesley wrote *Thoughts Upon Methodism* as the spiritual father of a trans-Atlantic movement into which he had invested a lifetime of ministry. He claimed to be unafraid that the people called Methodists “should ever cease to exist in either Europe or America.” The movement was too big, too well organized, and too successful to imagine it disappearing any time soon. What he feared, however, was that this movement would lose its spiritual vitality, and his legacy would end up becoming a dead sect bereft of the charismatic gifts it was raised up to spread.

More than two hundred and thirty years later, is not difficult to interpret Wesley’s prognosis as a tragic diagnosis of the general state of contemporary Methodism in the West. The situation is much worse than he feared, however, since persistent numerical decline has made it conceivable that one day the people called Methodists might actually cease to exist, even as a dead sect. Worse still, that day might not be too far ahead for some Methodist connections around the world.² One response from Wesleyan scholars and denominational leaders within the wider Methodist family has been a growing conviction that Methodism needs to recover its original nature as a discipleship movement.³ In different ways they lay blame on the processes of institutionalization, while recognizing this critique puts us on the horns of a dilemma. The character of a movement is quite different from that of an institution, but the growth of a movement requires the kind of organizational structures that are susceptible to being institutionalized.⁴ In simple terms, is it possible for the structures of an institution to retain the character of a movement?

Consider a range of voices from within the United Methodist Church. First, Scott Kisker roots the problem of decline in the changing identity of Methodism from an evangelistic movement to a “mainline” denomination. This was accompanied by a shift in perception about Wesley himself: “We no longer viewed our founder as an evangelist, a man caught

up in a movement of the Holy Spirit," but as a mere folk theologian whose principles could be used to justify a respectable but "unholy alliance" with wider society.⁵ George Hunter develops this further by describing early Methodism as a "contagious Christian movement" that "contrasted remarkably with the more institutionalized expressions of Christianity."⁶ As such, the key question is whether "a once great movement, which over time developed into a more sterile institutional form, can become a contagious movement once again? If so, what would that look like?"⁷ His characteristic solution is to deploy church growth principles at the level of congregational mission. Scott Jones has urged the denomination as a whole "to become a movemental institution", whose most important characteristics are "clarity of purpose and discipline of execution."⁸ Finally, Gil Rendle enquires whether new movements can be "birthed by and live within an established institution" in order to "provide new life and energy"?⁹ This is an interesting proposal, but the history of Methodism doesn't make it look too promising at first glance.¹⁰

Amidst these varied insights and agendas, there is a shared conviction that the process of institutionalization has instilled a collective "amnesia" about Methodist doctrine, spirit, and discipline. In one way or another, they conclude with a prophetic call to change that begins with doctrine, is long on discipline, but often short on spirit!¹¹ The aim of this paper is not to resolve the complexities of movement thinking and the challenges of institutionalization. It is simply to examine Wesley's own views on the origin and growth of early Methodism along with his mature concerns about its spiritual health, and let this discernment speak into the current debate. More specifically, I will attempt to draw out what Wesley means by the "spirit" of Methodism, and why the decline and future of the people called Methodists is ultimately a spiritual issue that calls for missionary zeal and calls out the gift of evangelist.

Facing Our Timidity

Wesley's fascination with collecting statistics on Methodist membership is one thing his spiritual children have not abandoned since the movement began. Drawing on this data, scholars have been able to narrate the astonishing rise and fall of Methodism, as a trans-Atlantic phenomenon, even if there is disagreement about how to interpret the facts.

Very helpfully, David Hempton concludes his book, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, by surveying various social-historical explanations for numerical decline.¹² I will roughly follow his example as a springboard for reflecting on Wesley's own observations, which provide clues about the underlying spiritual dynamics at work.

Routinization

First, there are explanations for decline based on the Weberian principle of routinization.¹³ This theory posits the inevitable change of character in social movements as they are transmuted from charismatic organizations into settled institutions. In short, the charismatic vitality with which a movement first sets out is channeled into institutional structures and eventually gets lost. Flexible structures put in place by the first generation to organize and serve a growing movement, become the hardened objects of preservation by subsequent generations. From a theological perspective, it can describe how the church ends up having the form of religion without the power of godliness; and it is not difficult to see how this process can account for the decline of Methodism as an ecclesiastical institution. Ironically, formalism in the Church of England was the very problem that the early Methodist movement sought to address.

I suggest that turning to Wesley helps us uncover the spiritual dynamic behind this process of routinization, as the temptation to exchange the cost of missionary zeal for the comfort of institutional structures.¹⁴ It's a problem that goes back to the origins of the church itself. The descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost gave birth to a holiness movement that would spread across the earth. But from the beginning, there have been two powers at work in the church: a "mystery of godliness," which is the sanctifying power of the Spirit; and a "mystery of iniquity," which is the energy of Satan instilling a love of the world and especially its riches.¹⁵ Apart from times of overt persecution, the mystery of iniquity works by stealth, darkening people's hearts, and quenching the Spirit by imperceptible degrees. This process fatally wounded the early Christian movement when Constantine flooded the church with riches and power, and effectively killed its radical witness in the world.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the mystery of godliness has re-emerged periodically in "revivals of religion," or movements of real Christianity raised up by God to renew a worldly church.¹⁷ He noted the observation of Martin Luther, however, that such

movements rarely lasted for more than one generation, or about thirty years, after which their founding zeal was lost and they either perished from the earth or remained as a dry cold sect. In Wesley's estimation, this was the fate of the Reformation churches themselves, and he feared it might be the fate of Methodism as well. But why?

Wesley believed that God raised up the Methodist movement to renew the spirit of biblical and primitive Christianity. It all began with just a few zealous young men in Oxford, and from there it spread throughout the world.¹⁸ As a "revival of religion," the people called Methodists had two unique traits compared with other historical movements. First, he boasted they were still very much alive and growing after more than sixty years. And second, he claimed their "peculiar glory" was retaining the character of a renewal movement, capable of uniting all real Christians in a lifeless and divided Christendom. Because of this calling, he refused to let the people called Methodists become a separate church, despite the tensions this caused and the apparent benefits it would appear to offer the movement. For Wesley, it would be in "direct contradiction to [God's] whole design in raising them up; namely, to spread scriptural religion throughout the land, among people of every denomination."¹⁹ He viewed the desire for independence and "party spirit" as a sign of the mystery of iniquity at work tempting them to substitute the cost of a missionary vocation for the ease of a settled institution in alliance with the world. Following the Reformation, he observed that when the Presbyterians, Anabaptists, and Quakers gained their autonomy as separate churches, they lost their missionary vocation and then "did scarce any good, except to their own little body." Indeed, Wesley recounts a prophetic word given to him personally, that "whenever the Methodists leave the Church, God will leave them."²⁰

Of course, Wesley also assisted in the foundation of a separate Methodist church in America, but only when there was no established church left to renew. Perhaps Wesley believed the spirit of a movement could inhabit the structures of a church, so long as the mystery of iniquity was subdued by their zealous discipleship.²¹ It is routinization not organization that is the problem. But when ecclesiastical ambition turns our desire for structures into an end in itself, we end up turning a living organization into a lifeless institution. Wesley knew that putting ecclesiastical ambition and self-preservation ahead of missionary vocation would compromise the spirit of Methodism and the character of a movement.

Accommodation

Second, there are socio-historical accounts of decline that tend to idealize the pioneers of early Methodism and attribute the problem of decline to a deliberate series of choices that gradually departed from the founding missionary vision. The principle of routinization, from movement to institution, might also be aligned with the transformation of Methodism from a “sect” to a “church.”²² Sociologically speaking, a “church” can be defined as an institution that seeks to exist in equilibrium with the world, by accommodating to the customs of the dominant culture; whereas a “sect” occupies a stance of protest to worldliness, both in the culture and the church. Wesley believed the Methodist movement was raised up to be a holiness sect, and to become a separate church would set it on a path to accommodation and death. He could refer to Methodism as a sect with a catholic spirit!²³ What he feared was that it would become a “dead sect,” alongside every other institutionalized church. From this perspective, Methodist decline might confirm a failure to heed Wesley’s advice of holding fast to the doctrine, spirit, and discipline, which originally defined them as a movement.²⁴ What are these defining characteristics?

First, Wesley maintained the “fundamental doctrine” of the Methodists was that “the Bible is the whole and sole rule both of Christian faith and practice,”²⁵ and the essence of this is “holiness of heart and life.” Second, he traces the “spirit” of Methodism back to the Holy Club in Oxford, again, where four “zealous members” of the church gathered in the pursuit of holiness.²⁶ Third, this zealous spirit eventually took them out of the church institutions and into the fields, where they proclaimed the doctrine of holiness, and invited people to join the movement by participating in the “discipline” of society, class, and band meetings. Wesley describes the “essence” of Methodism as holiness of heart and life. Methodist doctrine, spirit and discipline are the “circumstantial” that serve the pursuit of holiness. But Wesley warns that if “the circumstantial parts are lost, the essential will soon be lost” and “what remains will be dung and dross.”²⁷

Wesley described the people called Methodists as a “vineyard of the Lord,” tended and made fruitful through the gifts of doctrine, spiritual helps, and discipline.²⁸ First, he celebrates how they maintained “with equal zeal and diligence, the doctrine of free, full, present justification... and of entire sanctification both of heart and life...being as tenacious of inward holiness as any mystic, and of outward as any Pharisee.”²⁹ Second,

he speaks of Methodist societies, classes and bands as “spiritual helps” for pursuing the essence of this doctrine. And, third, the movement grew by these means, as the mystery of iniquity was overcome through the exercise of robust discipline. Regular examination of the Methodist people enabled their spiritual leaders to promote zeal, admonish sin, and exclude “disorderly walkers” from the movement.³⁰ When Wesley talks about “discipline” he is primarily referring to the principles of both embrace and exclusion associated with the covenantal dynamics of belonging to a voluntary movement. It is this discipline that the practices of society and class meeting were intended to serve.

Yet Wesley was forced to bemoan how even this vineyard brought forth wild grapes, because they exchanged their first love for “that grand poison of souls, the love of the world.” They once endured suffering for the sake of the poor, but they had become soft by the comfort of riches. Their thirst for God had been slaked by the desires of the flesh and neglect of the spiritual helps.³¹ Indeed, Wesley’s fear for the people called Methodists was rooted in the observation of what seems like an inevitable sociological principle: “I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will...love of the world in all its branches.” In the end, “although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.” In other words, it would seem that Methodism contained the seeds of its own demise.³²

Eighteen months before his death, Wesley rehearsed this penetrating critique with deep lament over a movement that could be so blessed with doctrine and discipline, yet whose spirit was so undermined by worldly desires.³³ He argued that the accumulation of riches, when it left some in needless poverty, would “continually grieve the Holy Spirit of God, and in a great measure stop his gracious influences from descending on our assemblies.”³⁴ For Wesley, this was a failure of good stewardship. The accumulation of riches was another sign of the mystery of iniquity at work: that they had “forgot, or at least not duly attended to” the cost of discipleship and the demand of Jesus to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily and follow him. With a note of regret, Wesley observed that the work of God could go on in a “surprising manner” notwithstanding this “capital defect,” but not in the same degree and presumably not without continually undermining itself. Despite the benefits of sound doctrine and discipline,

the only way to preserve the spirit of Methodism from accommodation to worldliness, was to recover their missionary zeal and give away their riches as an act of spiritual warfare.³⁵ In the end, it is selfish ambition and worldly aspirations that compromise the spirit of Methodism and the character of a movement.

Secularization

Third, there are various explanations for the decline of the Methodism rooted in secularization theory.³⁶ At the risk of oversimplifying an increasingly contested field of research; the problem of secularization can be addressed from two different perspectives when it comes to the church. On the one hand, there are external factors associated with the rise of modernity, the collapse of Christendom, and the marginalization of Christian belief in Western culture as a whole. From this perspective, Methodist decline can be attributed to the difficulty of attracting unchurched people to an increasingly irrelevant social institution. On the other hand, there are factors internal to the church itself that have contributed to its own demise. From this perspective, the spirit of Methodism loses out to the spirit of Enlightenment, as its supernatural convictions and missionary zeal are gradually accommodated to the customs of liberal modernity.³⁷ Theologically speaking, the intrinsic problem of secularization is not that it rules out belief in God, but that it makes such belief irrelevant to pursuits of everyday life, and kills the church by stealth, from the inside out.³⁸

It would be anachronistic to say that Wesley lived in a secular context, but he did live through the emergence of Enlightenment culture and has something to say about its internal effects on the church.³⁹ Wesley argued that the underlying spiritual disease of humanity was “living without God” in the world, and such are “the vast majority of even those who are called Christians!” They are not atheists in the common sense of the word, but “practical Atheists” who are dissipated by the world and uncentered from God.⁴⁰ We might say the mystery of iniquity does its worst by having us profess belief in God while living as though he doesn’t exist, or at least settling for a way of life that is indistinguishable from those who don’t believe. When this mindset invades the church, it results in a process of self-secularization. Ronald Knox suggested that Methodism emerged on the cusp of modernity as a movement of enthusiasm, and an antidote to the Deists who were making practical atheism theologically respectable in the church.⁴¹

Wesley helps us diagnose the root problem of self-secularization as spiritual “dissipation.” We are encompassed by a world that tends to separate us from God; that make us inattentive to his presence; that distracts us from everyday discipleship; that forms in us the habits of practical atheism; and eventually conforms us to its own godless values. Spiritual dissipation is the constant threat of being gradually and imperceptibly unhinged from God, until his influences are gone, and only worldliness remains. This is a problem that affects the hearts of every individual, spreads through the church, and infects the development of whole denominations. If the people called Methodists lose enthusiasm, they lose their very reason for being.⁴²

Though Wesley still lived in a deeply Christendom context, he described eighteenth century England as a thoroughly “dissipated and ungodly” nation. He viewed Methodists to be those who had “not yet bowed either their knee or their heart to the god of this world; who, cleaving close to the God of heaven, are not born away by the flood” of practical atheism. They “dare swim against the stream,” and “if they cannot turn the tide back, they can at least bear an open testimony against it!”⁴³ The cure of dissipation is to have a “single eye,” to “pursue one thing: happiness in knowing, loving and serving God” alone.⁴⁴ Again, Wesley traces this conviction back to the origins of the movement, as a core conviction of the Holy Club. They gathered to remind one another that, “By the grace of God, this one thing I do: (at least it is my constant aim:) I see God, I love God, I serve God. I glorify him with my body and with my spirit.”⁴⁵ Perhaps this is why Wesley continued to urge the impossibility of being “half a Christian” or even “half Methodist.”⁴⁶ Swimming against the tide is not for the half-hearted or double-minded! This was the zealous “spirit” with which they first set out!

Hempton suggests that Methodism was a profoundly counter-cultural movement that “thrived on opposition, but it could not last long on equipoise alone.”⁴⁷ The cost of ecclesiastical ambition in this world was a decline in “otherworldly zeal,” which compromised both its central message and evangelistic spirit. The long-term outcome has been an unsustainable pattern of increasing influence and decreasing recruitment. So, it would seem there are only two options for a movement of enthusiasm in a secular culture. Swim against the tide, or be swept away by it. Sound doctrine helps us discern the dangerous currents in which we swim, and the direction in which we must travel. Sound discipline can train us for the

swim, and help us stay on course. But only an enthusiastic and zealous spirit will empower us to keep on swimming, and turn opposition into an opportunity for witness. All it takes is a half-hearted commitment to God amidst the tides of practical atheism for self-secularization to fatally wound the spirit of Methodism and the character of a movement.

Inoculation

Let me add one more perspective. John Haywood has shown how the principles of social epidemiology can account for the growth and decline of Methodism as a function of enthusiasm.⁴⁸ The process of social diffusion by which the early Methodist movement grew and spread so rapidly was exactly the opposite of spiritual dissipation. On these terms, enthusiasm can be thought of as an infectious disease, and the enthusiast as a contagious believer. Evangelistic potential is a measure of how deeply an enthusiast is infected and how much contact is made with susceptible people. The vitality of a church or movement, therefore, is determined by the proportion of enthusiasts and the quality of their missionary zeal. Growth loses momentum for lack of enthusiasm, and numerical decline sets in as missionary zeal is reduced. Wesley understood that the movement would fail if the mystery of iniquity caused them to settle for being half Methodists and immunized them against the “disease” of scriptural holiness. Worse still, Methodism might become so accommodated to lukewarm Christianity that its false witness simply inoculates the general population against the real thing.

Wesley has plenty to say about the social diffusion of the gospel in a movement of enthusiasm.⁴⁹ He observed how the Spirit at Pentecost filled the apostles with overflowing boldness, gathered a community of radical holiness, and scattered them abroad as a movement of gospel witness. Real Christianity did not consist in systems of doctrine or structures of discipline per se, but was a powerful reality to be encountered in “men’s hearts and lives.”⁵⁰ The Spirit of holiness set their hearts ablaze with love for God and neighbor, and gave birth to a gospel movement by “spreading from one to another, and so gradually making its way into the world.”⁵¹ Persecution could not prevail against their zealous love, and martyrdom provided an opportunity for showing that “their lives were of equal force with their words.”⁵² But the mystery of iniquity grew up alongside, then as now, and “we tread a beaten path: the still unceasing corruptions of the succeeding generations.” Wesley asks, “Where does this Christianity

now exist?" Far from living as "burning and shining lights" with a "burning zeal" for evangelism, he said the Western church was "as far from it as hell is from heaven!" Could the answer be found among the people called Methodists?⁵³

As we have seen, Wesley observed that the origins and growth of early Methodism followed the same pattern as the early church. God raised up a few young men in Oxford, and awakened them to the truth about holy love, which they boldly "declared on all occasions, in private and public; having no design but to promote the glory of God, and no desire but to save souls from death." From there, "the little leaven spread wider and wider," until the movement spread to every part of the land, from England to Ireland, America and beyond. From place to place, this pattern was repeated as word and Spirit raised up a zealous few through whom the kingdom of God would be established and "silently increase, wherever it is set up, and spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, and from one kingdom to another."⁵⁴

Wesley claimed that "the grand stumbling block" to the general spread of the gospel was "the lives of Christians;" that is, nominal and worldly Christians whose lives belie the truth of holy love.⁵⁵ But God never leaves himself without a witness, and where Christianity has become cold and dead, the Spirit of holiness can begin the process again. He cautioned would-be Methodists that the world would label them "hot-brained enthusiasts," because they insisted on "infecting so many others" with their extremist views. "Zealous lovers of God and man" can expect to be persecuted and suffer the loss of family, friends and even life itself. But, he says, this is "the very badge of our discipleship" and "if we have it not, we are bastards and not sons" of God.⁵⁶

This is how Wesley prepares the ground for talking about "social holiness," which is really an evangelical missiology aimed at the general spread of the gospel. If the mystery of iniquity could not silence the Methodist movement through blatant persecution, it might tempt her members to avoid it by settling for a form of private spirituality or public morality. This is the problem of "solitary Christianity," or the temptation to believe that one can be a real Christian and live anonymously in the world. For Wesley, this is not merely a problem, it is an impossibility! The Spirit of holiness makes us the salt of the world, and it is the nature of true holiness "to diffuse itself, on every side, to all those among whom you are." Indeed, "this is the great reason why the providence of God has so mingled

you together with other men, that whatever grace you have received of God may through you be communicated to others."⁵⁷ The same logic may be applied to the beauty of holiness as the light of the world. Just as it is impossible to hide a city on a hill, so it is impossible to conceal "a holy, zealous, active lover of God and man."⁵⁸

The only way to stop our light from shining is to snuff it out. The only way to stop salt from savoring is to stop being salt. Or, to reverse the logic, "Whatever religion can be concealed, is not Christianity!" Perhaps a candle can be re-lit, though scripture gives us reason to doubt. But it is certain that saltiness cannot be regained once it is lost. A believer may fall and rise again, but falling to the point of apostasy is another matter. Wesley appeals to those who "once were holy and heavenly-minded, and consequently zealous of good works," but have now become "flat, insipid, dead, both careless of your own soul and useless to the souls of other men."⁵⁹ They are like the branches that have stopped bearing fruit, and which the Father will cut down and cast into the fire.

What is social holiness? It is the social diffusion of the gospel, or the spread of scriptural holiness. The gospel of holy love is the most virulent disease in the world. If we have it, we are contagious. If we are not contagious, we do not have it. The mystery of iniquity is working to immunize us against it, through instilling the fear of persecution or just a plain love of this world. What if Methodist decline is a sign of denominational apostasy, that goes beyond the maintenance of sound doctrine and discipline? What if the abject dearth of evangelism is a sign of catastrophic power failure? In the midst of a thriving movement, Wesley insisted there was no reason to believe Methodism must eventually peter out. God could use the method of contagious witness until holiness and happiness covered the whole earth. But what if the Lord is finished with the institutions of Methodism, because they long since ceased to be a gospel movement and are now another stumbling block to his mission. These may just be the ruminations of a "hot brained enthusiast," but wouldn't that be the point?! It is only when we stop asking such questions that we compromise the spirit of Methodism and the character of a movement.

Fanning the Flame

It should be clear by now that my simple assessment of the problem facing Methodism is a failure of "spirit" long before it is an issue

of doctrine and discipline. But the word “spirit” is an elusive term to define. Theologically speaking, the human spirit is that which makes us capable of communion with God, opens us to the influences of the Holy Spirit, and enables us to become co-workers with Jesus in his kingdom.⁶⁰ From a Wesleyan perspective, when the Spirit of holiness sets our hearts on fire with love for God and neighbor, the human spirit responds with missionary zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. This is the true spirit of Methodism and defines the character of the movement. Let me be clear. You can’t have this spirit without doctrine and discipline; but you can easily be learned and disciplined without the zeal of holy love infusing the heart, transfusing the life, and diffusing into the world. So, how is this spirit fanned into flame?

The Fire of Holy Love

It has been claimed that Methodism was born in song.⁶¹ Congregational singing held together the doctrine, spirit and discipline of Methodism in a single practice.⁶² On the one hand, John Wesley claimed that singing for the Methodist was “a means of raising or quickening the spirit of devotion, of confirming his faith, of enlivening his hope, and of kindling or increasing his love to God and man.”⁶³ On the other hand, he urged the Methodists to “sing spiritually” and “have an eye to God in every word you sing...and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually.”⁶⁴ Charles also warned, “Still let us on our guard be found, / and watch against the power of sound with sacred jealousy; / lest haply sense should damp our zeal, / and music’s charms bewitch and steal / our heart away from thee.”⁶⁵ There is a difference between emotivism and true renewal. The ultimate test of singing as a means of grace is that the flame of zealous love still consumes us when our meetings are over, in everyday discipleship and mission.

Zealous love is a constant theme in the hymns, and the spirit to be kindled in the singing. Charles perhaps gives us his best theology of zeal in two short verses:

Jesus, I would find,
Thy zeal for God in me,
Thy yearning pity for mankind,
Thy burning charity.

In me thy Spirit dwell!
 In me thy bowels move!
 So shall the fervour of my zeal
 Be the pure flame of love.⁶⁶

Zeal is the fire of holy love burning in our hearts for God and neighbor. It is a fire kindled by the Spirit that consumes our affections and moves us by its power. But above all, it is the zeal of Jesus himself imparted to us by the Spirit: "O arm me with the mind, / Meek Lamb, that was in thee! / And let my knowing zeal be joined / With perfect charity. / With calm and tempered zeal, / Let me enforce thy call, / And vindicate thy gracious will, / Which offers life to all."⁶⁷ This is missionary zeal for the least and the lost. The Spirit also imparts a passion, to be a living sacrifice, offering up ourselves to God and laying down our lives for others: "Let me to thy glory live: / My every sacred moment spend, / In publishing the sinner's friend. / Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart / With boundless charity divine! / So shall I all my strength exert, / And love them with a zeal like thine; / And lead them to thy open side, / The sheep, for whom their Shepherd died."⁶⁸

Charles also warns against the temptation of "Laodicean ease." We must beware seeking the pleasures of this world and settling for a "lifeless form" of religion while losing the power of God. He intercedes, "Thou rather wouldst that we were cold / Than seem to serve thee without zeal."⁶⁹ The fire of the Spirit only falls upon those who long to have their sinful ways put to death, and be entirely consumed by the gospel cause:

Thou God that answerest by fire,
 On thee in Jesu's name we call;
 Fulfil our faithful heart's desire,
 And let on us thy Spirit fall.

Bound to the altar of thy cross,
 Our old offending nature lies.
 Now for the honour of thy cause,
 Come and consume the sacrifice!

Consume our lusts as rotten wood,
 Consume our stony hearts within;
 Consume the dust, the serpent's food,
 And lick up all the streams of sin.

It's body totally destroy!
 Thyself the Lord, the God approve!
 And fill our hearts with holy joy,
 And fervent zeal, and perfect love.⁷⁰

The nature of God is a consuming fire. To be consumed by his zealous love is the heart of Christian perfection. To share his burning heart for the world is our missionary zeal. This is the spirit of Methodism. This is the fire of love we must fan into flame. Where it is lacking, the movement dies.

The Order of Godly Zeal

John Wesley opens his sermon *On Zeal* by claiming there are “few subjects in the whole compass of religion, that are of greater importance than this. For without zeal it is impossible, either to make any considerable progress in religion ourselves, or to do any considerable service to our neighbor.”⁷¹ Yet, he laments that “there have been so few treatises on the subject,” and I can say it remains the same today.⁷² The nature of zeal, like spirit, is hard to define and even harder to defend as a religious virtue. On the one hand, religious zeal in particular is easily and justifiably associated with the use violence, and so better avoided altogether. On the other hand, zeal has typically involved the kind of enthusiasm that settled religious institutions bent on accommodation to the world cannot tolerate. Perhaps it is not surprising that reflection on the nature of true zeal, where it can be found, is a recurrent theme in spiritual movements whose missionary vigor has been a challenge to the lukewarm state of the church.

Wesley begins by reflecting on the etymology of zeal, as the general experience of having our affections made “hot” or strongly moved for some purpose. True spiritual zeal, however, “is all love,” as “the love of God and man fills up its whole nature.” Love exists in degrees, and it is possible to be loving but not zealous. So, like Charles, he defines true Christian zeal as “fervent love,” or “the flame of love.”⁷³ It is not just one affection among many, but a quality that permeates the soul. Nor is it a fleeting temper, but “a steady, rooted disposition.”⁷⁴ It is the gift of Pentecost; and as the fire of the Spirit burns up the roots of pride, bitterness and anger, it also bears the fruit of humility, meekness and patience.

Zeal also comes in degrees, and we are to be more or less zealous depending on the object of our love. Wesley illustrates this by allotting the ingredients of Christian discipleship to a set of concentric circles.⁷⁵ First,

the love of God and neighbor is at the center, and we should be most zealous for the Spirit of love to be shed abroad in our hearts. Second, this hot center is surrounded by every other holy affection, and we should be zealous for holy love to reign over all our dispositions and actions. Third, these fervent affections are encompassed by the works of piety and mercy, and we should become zealous co-workers with the Spirit in saving our own souls and those around us. And fourth, the pursuit of holiness in heart and life is encapsulated by the church, and we are to be zealous for that fellowship that provokes us to ever greater love and goodness. This, says Wesley, is “the entire, connected system of Christianity.”⁷⁶

On the one hand, the order of zeal describes a life of discipleship in which the flame of love spreads from the inside out, from heart to life, and from person to person. It accounts for how the gospel is spread, from heart to heart, house to house, town to town, and nation to nation. On the other hand, the flame of love may be fanned from the outside in, through a commitment to Christian fellowship that holds us accountable for using the spiritual disciplines as means of grace in the pursuit of holiness. But the order of zeal must always flow from the inside out. One way to account for the decline of Methodism is not merely a lack of zeal, but a fatal inversion of its true order. When the structures of the church, or the disciplines of fellowship, or the works of piety and mercy become the objects of our greatest zeal, then these means of grace all too easily become ends in themselves.⁷⁷ The flame of love is asphyxiated by the very means ordained to increase it.

The Essence of a Missionary Spirit

Wesley says that “zeal for all good works is, according to my idea, an essential ingredient of true religion,” and true zeal is the “the flame of love, or fervent love to God and man.”⁷⁸ He argues that truly zealous works of piety are motivated by a fervent longing for more of God; and truly zealous works of mercy flow from it, by using “every means in your power to save souls from death.”⁷⁹ The whole logic of zealous love is evangelistic and missionary in nature. It is an all-consuming love for others that is “on the full stretch to save their souls from death,” while ever “the glory of God swallows him up.”⁸⁰ If our works of piety are truly zealous, it will be proved in our works of mercy; and if our works of mercy are truly zealous, it will be proved by drawing people to the God of love himself. To those who would reduce works of mercy to alleviating the needs of the body alone,

Wesley says, "Friend, come up higher! Do you 'prophesy' in the 'name' of Christ?" Pray that "the influence of his Spirit attend your word, and make it the power of God unto salvation."⁸¹ Truly zealous works of mercy are evangelistic in nature, as the Spirit of love anoints both our deeds and our words with the power of effective witness.

This pattern of holiness and mission was most prominently set forth by the early Methodist preachers as an example for the whole movement to follow.⁸² John Gaulter observed that his fellow preachers "gave efficacy to the savour of their discourses by the active piety of their lives; and their glowing zeal for the salvation of souls."⁸³ As a young convert, William Black recounted, "I felt a peculiar love to souls, and seldom passed a man, woman, or child without lifting up my heart to God on their account; or passed a house without praying for all in it . . . so that sometimes I was constrained to speak to them, though I met with rough treatment in return."⁸⁴ Such zeal gave their lives a highly contagious quality, and the conversation of Thomas Walsh was likened to a "fire; warming, refreshing, and comforting all that were about him, and begetting in their souls a measure of the same zealous concern for the glory of God, and the salvation of sinners, which burned in his own breast."⁸⁵ In the midst of a powerful love-feast, John Furz recorded how a group of local leaders became so "filled with zeal for the glory of God, and the good of souls" that "they dispersed themselves on Sundays, went into the country villages, sung and prayed, and exhorted the people to turn to God."⁸⁶

The preachers were known for their single-eyed devotion to one thing: a longing for more of God's love in their own lives, in order to share that love with others, and to stir up the same missionary zeal throughout the Methodist movement. In particular, they put flesh on the evolving doctrine of Christian perfection as the ultimate expression of zealous love. Seeking perfection was more about mission than morality. Alexander Mather described the experience as having a "heart wholly devoted to God," and being filled with "a fervent zeal for the glory of God and the good of souls, as swallowed up every other care and consideration."⁸⁷ They were not all "extraordinary or splendid" as preachers, but the flame of love shone through their lives and made them fruitful in their labors. In a letter to Miss Bolton, Wesley encouraged this favorite preacher to, "Stir up the gift of God that is in you. Be zealous! Be active! Spare no one. Speak for God, wherever you are." She must "aspire after full salvation" and exhort others

to follow her example. Finally he warns her “do not decline in your zeal for this.”⁸⁸

Wesley observed that where this proclamation was lacking in any place, the whole Methodist society would sink into decline, both spiritually and numerically. The early Methodist preachers fanned the flame in others by holding fast to the doctrine of perfect love and the discipline of Methodist society, in both precept and example. One of Wesley’s assistants wrote about a couple of ordinary local preachers, “men of not large gifts, but zealous for Christian perfection,” by “their warm conversation on the head, kindled a flame in some of the Leaders. These pressed others to seek after it; and for this end appointed meetings for prayer. The fire then spread wider and wider, till the whole society was in a flame.”⁸⁹

Guarding the Good Deposit

In the end, it is missionary zeal that guards the doctrine and discipline of the movement. Fortunately, Wesley does not leave us guessing about the “good deposit” he intended to pass on. He claimed the doctrine of “full sanctification,” or perfection in love, was “the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up.”⁹⁰ And the “Large Minutes” of Conference, which served as a standard of discipline, records that “God’s design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists” was “to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”⁹¹ This language of being “raised up” implies that God had a distinct purpose in mind for them, which would not suffer compromise.

The Charism of the Founder

There is a lot of talk these days among missiologists about the movemental nature of the church, but little theological explanation of what this means. Perhaps the most sustained attempt at a theology of ecclesial movements has come out of the Catholic Church, rooted in the “charism of the founder.” Antonio Romano explains that this charism is a “unique experience of the Spirit” that brings into being a new movement of discipleship and mission.⁹² Founders have the ability to share their experience of the Spirit by a form of spiritual parenting, and establish a

pattern of doctrine and discipline that equips others to perpetuate the charism over time.⁹³

From this perspective, we can argue that the charism of Wesley was the spirit of Methodism: a missionary zeal for the spread of scriptural holiness expressed in the doctrine of perfection, and embodied in the discipline of Methodist society. The memorial to Wesley at City Road chapel gives voice to this charism by describing him as “a man of learning and sincere piety scarcely inferior to any; in zeal, ministerial labors, and extensive usefulness, superior, perhaps, to all men, since the days of St Paul.”⁹⁴ This is not an exaggerated eulogy, but an epitaph to a spiritual parent, by a people who had enjoyed the gift of the Spirit through him.

The biggest danger to a spiritual movement is forgetting their charism, which is likely to come through the processes of institutionalization. Romano explains that amnesia leads to “spiritual suicide.”⁹⁵ It is a form of “betrayal” in which we prefer the foundational structures of a movement to the evangelical spirit of the founder himself. A movement “will continue to live and bear fruit as long as the community’s spirituality is passed on from one person to another...through the constant attempt to transmit to posterity the founder’s unadulterated spirit.”⁹⁶ If the founding charism evaporates, however, the movement is thrown into a state of spiritual crisis and decline, and the original charism is “transmuted into a heap of cold ashes.”⁹⁷ There is no chance of recovering the spirit of Methodism without faithfulness to the founder’s doctrine and discipline, but there is no chance of recovering the character of a movement if that doctrine and discipline blinds us to the spirit from which they came. The question is, do we want the real Wesley, a spiritual parent on fire with missionary zeal, or just a safe version made in our own lukewarm image?

Raising Up Spiritual Children

The elderly Wesley recounted how God enabled him to raise up a few, young, poor preachers “without experience, learning, or art; but simple of heart, devoted to God, full of faith and zeal, seeking no honor, no profit, no pleasure, no ease, but merely to save souls.” And those who responded to the ministry of these preachers were “of the same spirit... simple of heart, devoted to God, zealous of good works” and desiring to attain full salvation.⁹⁸ A movement can only continue if its charism or spirit is imparted from one generation to the next. But over time, the mystery of

iniquity made some of his spiritual children “less zealous for God; and, consequently, less active, less diligent in his service.” As a consequence, “their word was not, as formerly, clothed with power: It carried with it no demonstration of the Spirit,” and “the same faintness of spirit was in their private conversation.” And as they “declined from their first love, so did many of the people.”⁹⁹

Given this state of declension, Wesley was bold enough to question whether God might “remove the candlestick from his people, and raise up another people, who will be more faithful to his grace.” At least, he warns those preachers who have lost their first love that God might “take the word of his grace utterly out of your mouth! Be assured, the Lord hath no need of you: his work doth not depend upon your help.”¹⁰⁰ For God can always raise up another movement, or new preachers, “endued with the spirit which they had lost...more zealous, more alive to God.” Surely the birth of the Holiness Movement and its Pentecostal offspring should remind us that the spirit of Methodism can live on, with or without their dying parents.

After Wesley’s death, one of his favorite sons, John Pawson, wrote his own last letter to a second generation of preachers, praying that “a double portion of that Spirit which influenced the first Methodist preachers may rest upon you who are likely to be their successors.” Following the example of Wesley, he urges them to hold fast to the principles with which they first set out, but his order begins with an appeal to the “spirit” of Methodism: “Take great care that you all constantly maintain the primitive Methodist spirit. Be serious, spiritual, and heavenly-minded. Be lively, zealous, and active in the service of God. Be crucified to this vain world, and filled with that Holy Spirit which raises the soul from earth to heaven” for “you are in great danger of conforming to the world, in your dress, your manners, and in your spirit and temper of mind.” And he offers a word of caution in admitting people to the ministry. We must be sure they are “soundly converted to God, are zealous for his glory,” and “only wish to spend and be spent in his work.” Because, “if ever the life and power of godliness begin to decay among the Methodists, look well to yourselves; for the first cause will be with the preachers.”¹⁰¹

The Character of a Methodist

W.E. Sangster, famous preacher of Westminster Central Hall in London, was a faithful son of Wesley in British Methodism. About eighty years ago, he reflected on how “the fire that once glowed with a great white heat burns low” in the Church.¹⁰² On the one hand, he held on to the hope that Methodism could be “born again,” and refused to accept the pessimist’s accounts of doom. On the other hand, he claimed that “the future of Methodism demands a faith that can move mountains, but the stupid optimists, if any survive, had better be killed off first.”¹⁰³ After surveying various explanations for decline, from the external challenges of culture to the internal failures of the Methodist machine, he comes to a simple but profound conclusion: “General criticism of ‘Methodism’ must give way to clear, incisive, and detailed criticism of a Methodist.”¹⁰⁴

Reflecting on the charisma of Wesley and the early Methodist movement, he observed that “there has been a definite diminution of vital and personal religion”, and the joyful “exuberance of primitive Christianity does not shine from us.” When it comes to sharing faith, Sangster laments, “small wonder we cannot give this glad secret away: we have so little to give.”¹⁰⁵ So, he argued that the nature and future of the church would depend on recovering a passion for scriptural holiness, kept alive through the disciplines of spiritual fellowship, and overflowing in “zeal for personal evangelism.” Even though “Methodism has lost its missionary passion,” he assures us that “a minority of passionate God-directed disciples could begin at once to affect the history of the world.”¹⁰⁶ It was the method of Jesus, it was the fruit of Pentecost, and it is what happened at the origins of Methodism.

A well-known story about Sangster has him interviewing a nervous young man for the Methodist ministry, who felt compelled to warn them that he had a shy disposition, and was not the sort of person who would set the river Thames on fire! “My dear young brother,” responded Sangster with wit and wisdom, “I’m not interested to know if you can set the Thames on fire. What I want to know is this: if I picked you up by the scruff of your neck and dropped you into the Thames, would it sizzle?”¹⁰⁷ Sangster was not primarily concerned with the young man’s natural dispositions for the ministry, but whether his heart was aflame with love, so that God might use him powerfully.

What the church needs is not more vital congregations, just a few vital Christians; where vitality is not measured in terms of institutional

effectiveness, but the glow of missionary zeal. It is a hungering and thirsting for just one thing: the glory of God and the salvation of souls. It cannot be manufactured, let alone mass-produced. But it can be caught from those who have been gifted by the Spirit to continue the charism of the founder, and fanned into flame. Apart from such persons, there is no movement, and there is no Methodism.

The Work of an Evangelist

In concluding, it is important to remember that Wesley's concerns about the health of the people called Methodists were not driven by numerical decline, but waning spiritual vitality. The organization was not declining at that point, but even in its advance he could discern the seeds of its own demise. And he observed that the momentum of the organization might well continue long after the spirit of the movement had evaporated. So, returning to our original question: Is it possible for the structures of an institution to retain the character of a movement? With Wesley's help, I have argued that this is ultimately a spiritual question that requires a spiritual answer. And the spiritual question is this: Are we lacking in zeal (Romans 12:11)? Or, put differently: Do we desire to be more zealous?

Zeal, of course, is not a virtue in itself. It has the general character of fervent love, but it always takes on the nature of that which is loved. The spirit of Methodism is not merely compromised by indifference, but can be lost through a false zeal for the ways of this world, which blinds it to the way of scriptural holiness, both concealing and compromising our true doctrine and discipline. But let us carefully observe that worldliness is no respecter of theology, for there are just as many culturally dissipated evangelicals as there are culturally determined liberals. Worse than this, there is a false zeal for the church itself, which makes the preservation of institutional structures more important than the pursuit of evangelistic mission, and all but guarantees the processes of routinization, accommodation and self-secularization.

When Wesley said that true zeal is only fervent love, he meant the holy love of God and neighbor, the essence of scriptural Christianity: that sets us ablaze by the Spirit, transforms us into the likeness of Jesus, and empowers us to give up everything for his cause. Pursuing this missionary zeal was the life of the early Methodist preachers; and fanning it into flame was their work as evangelists. If the church needs more vital Christians, and

true vitality is the flame of love, then we must pray that God will raise up those with the gift of an evangelist, and invest in them. They would need to re-evangelize the church in order to reach the world.

The gift of an evangelist is not the same as that of a prophet, though the two do go together. Wesleyan evangelists are not primarily concerned with discerning the signs of times. They are not motivated by a desire for gaining influence in the world or stemming decline in the church. They are simply zealous for the glory of God in the salvation of souls: to win not merely converts, but followers of Jesus; not merely disciples, but hearts set on fire by his Spirit; and not merely burning hearts, but lives of holy love through which this fire becomes a contagious movement. Evangelists are joyful when they see the gospel spreading from one glowing person to another; for they know that such a people have the power and the passion to accomplish anything in the church and the world. They are indignant when they see the glory of God being compromised, and his evangelistic mission to the least and the lost. In this way, they go to war against the mystery of iniquity, and become the Spirit's antidote to routinization, accommodation, and self-secularization of the church. But to those who have been inoculated against scriptural Christianity, their medicine will be bitter in the mouth.

From this perspective, Wesley's most important legacy was not his doctrine or his discipline but a movement of zealous preachers and people who put flesh on the way of scriptural holiness. They were remembered for their intrepidity, determination, resilience, and self-denial; for a flame of love that left all forms of religion in the shadows; and for a spiritual glow that was experienced by others as a display of raw power! And here was the good news for every broken heart and impoverished life: This same "spirit" was available to all who would commit to the doctrine and discipline of the Methodist movement.

If my arguments are right, the solution to decline will not be popular, because it will plunge our institutions into a state of tension. What the church needs today are zealots on fire with missionary zeal: uncompromising in their doctrine and unyielding in their discipline. Jesus raised up a few, and they changed the world. Wesley did the same, and his immediate successors kept the fire burning. So, I see my calling as an evangelist at Asbury Theological Seminary is to raise up a few young zealots, and pray for the charism of the founder to burn in their hearts. Of course, this must start with fanning the flame in my own heart, so I can

fan the flame in the lives of others. How does that flame get fanned? First, by creating a hunger for the beauty of holiness through proclaiming the doctrine of perfect love, as command and promise. Second, by showing those who are hungry how they may be filled by the Spirit through the means of grace and a life of obedience. Third, by investing my own life in them, through the disciplines of fellowship, so they might find the flame of love in my heart and catch on fire themselves. Fourth, by urging them to catalyze little movements of zealous love wherever they go. And, fifth, by preparing them to live as movement leaders who are ready to swim against the tide of institutionalism, so that “if they cannot turn the tide back, they can at least bear an open testimony against it!”¹⁰⁸

Let me give Wesley the last word. Being zealous means “performing all the ordinary actions of life with a single eye and a pure heart, offering them all in holy, fervent love, as sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁹ And when it comes to the day of judgment, the Lord will inquire of us all, “[W]hen thou wast made a partaker of this Spirit, crying in thy heart ‘Abba, Father’...Didst thou from thenceforth present thy soul and body, all thy thoughts, thy words, and actions, in one flame of love, as a holy sacrifice, glorifying me with thy body and thy spirit? Then ‘well done, good and faithful servant! Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord!’”¹¹⁰

End Notes

¹ John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Methodism* (1786), in: Thomas Jackson (Ed.), *The Works of John Wesley* (1872), ¶1, 13:320. Hereafter, WJW.

² See, for example, British Methodist Church, “2017 Statistics for Mission Triennial Report”, based on membership and attendance data for the period 2014-2016 (<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/2933/conf-2017-42-statistics-for-mission.pdf>, accessed 3 January 2019). The report shows a current membership of approx. 188k members, which represents a loss of approx. 75,000 members in the decade 2006-2016. More than 50% of churches have fewer than 17 members. At this rate of decline, membership will fall to zero in approx. 25 years from 2016. Rates of decline in the United Methodist Church are comparable, though the denomination is much stronger numerically (<http://www.gcuh.org/history/ united-methodist-membership-statistics>, accessed 3 January 2019).

³ Scott Jones, *The Once and Future Wesleyan Movement* (Abingdon Press, 2016), xiii. This is the central thesis of Martyn Atkins, *Discipleship... And the People Called Methodists* (Methodist Publishing, 2010).

⁴ See Jones, *Wesleyan Movement*, 14; and Atkins, *Discipleship*, 27-28, 51f. Neither of these denominational leaders wrestle with the sociological differences between movement and institution, and to what extent they may be in/compatible modes of organization.

⁵ Scott Kisker, *Methodist or Mainline? Rediscovering Our Evangelistic Mission* (Discipleship Resources, 2008), 12-18, 23, 114-5.

⁶ George Hunter, *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement* (Abingdon Press, 2011), 5.

⁷ Hunter, *Contagious Methodist Movement*, 7.

⁸ Jones, *Wesleyan Movement*, 14.

⁹ Gil Rendle, *Back to Zero: The Search to Rediscover the Methodist Movement* (Abingdon Press, 2011), 4, 76-88.

¹⁰ Early Methodism was a renewal movement within the Church of England that could not be accommodated within the existing structures of the Church, nor were those structures open to being challenged by it.

¹¹ See, for example, Jones who interprets the “spirit” of Methodism as a “focus on the Holy Spirit” but he quickly ends up translating this into the need for the flexibility of denominational structures, and his concluding prescriptions are largely managerial in nature (*Once and Future Wesleyan Movement*, 57-62). Laura Bartels Felleman interprets “spirit” to mean “spiritual experience,” and experiencing the work of the Spirit through the different stages on the way of salvation. But the outcome is an attempt to reinterpret the whole exercise in terms of neuro-psychological categories and church vitality programs (*The Form and the Power of Religion: John Wesley on Methodist Vitality* (Cascade Books, 2012), 36-59).

¹² David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (Yale University Press, 2006), ch.8. See also, Martin Wellings follows a similar procedure in “A Time to be Born and a Time to Die? A Historians Perspective on the Future of Methodism”, in: Jane Craske and Clive Marsh (Eds.), *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge* (Cassell, 1999), 152-153.

¹³ Max Weber introduces this principle in, *Economy and Society* (University of California Press, 1978).

¹⁴ Wesley’s central argument can be found with various nuances in Sermon 132, “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel” (1777) and Sermon 61, “The Mystery of Iniquity” (1783), which can be found in Albert C. Outler (Ed.), *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, Vols.1-4 (Abingdon Press, 1976–). Hereafter, *Sermon*. Also, “Thoughts Upon a Late Phenomenon” (1788), WJW 13: 328-330.

¹⁵ Wesley, “Late Phenomenon,” ¶ 1-2. See also, Sermon, “Mystery of Iniquity,” ¶ 11-14.

¹⁶ Sermon, "Mystery of Iniquity," ¶ 27.

¹⁷ Wesley, "Late Phenomenon," ¶ 4; Sermon, "On Laying the Foundation," §II.12.

¹⁸ Wesley, "Late Phenomenon," ¶ 5; Sermon, "On Laying the Foundations," §I.1.

¹⁹ Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," §II.8. Wesley, "Late Phenomenon," ¶ 6-8. Wesley consistently maintained that Methodism was raised up to be an ecumenical renewal movement, whose principles and practices were nothing other than plain scriptural Christianity, and should be the commitments of all real Christians.

²⁰ Sermon, "Laying the Foundation," §II.12-15. This proved true for those who separated from Methodism to form their own independent congregations tended to suffer the same fate.

²¹ Wesley's tract, "Thoughts Upon Methodism," was written shortly after this new development in America and the subsequent re-affirmation at annual conference in England for the movement not to become a separate church at home.

²² These distinctions were first introduced by Max Weber, then developed by Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, Vol. 1 (Macmillan, 1931), and H. R. Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Holt, 1929).

²³ Wesley uses the term "sect" in a number of subtle ways. On the one hand, he uses the term "sect" can simply refer to the Methodists as a "distinct" body of people, within the church, and apart from the world. On the other hand, he refuses to accept that the Methodists are "sectarian" or divided against other Christians, with all the negative zeal and bigotry that accompanies it. Methodism is a sect with a catholic spirit.

²⁴ Wesley's frequent argument about the dangers of accommodation to worldliness can be seen in his "Thoughts Upon Methodism" (1786), and Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard" (1779); and Sermon 116, "The Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity" (1789).

²⁵ Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Methodism," ¶ 2.

²⁶ Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Methodism," ¶ 3; Sermon, "On God's Vineyard," introduction.

²⁷ Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Methodism," ¶ 8.

²⁸ Cf. Isaiah 5:4.

²⁹ Sermon, "On God's Vineyard," §I.8.

³⁰ Sermon, "On God's Vineyard," §II.1-§III.3.

³¹ Sermon, "On God's Vineyard," §V.2-7.

³² Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Methodism," ¶9-10. Even if that demise took a lot longer than Luther's rule of thirty years.

³³ Sermon, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," ¶7-8.

³⁴ Sermon, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," ¶9.

³⁵ This became a topic that Wesley revisited with increasing intensity in the latter years of his life. See his Sermon 87, "The Danger of Riches" (1780); Sermon 108, "On Riches" (1788); and Sermon 126, "On the Danger of Increasing Riches" (1790). Wesley saw yet another sign of the mystery of iniquity at work was the relationship between increasing in riches, and decreasing in the practice of fasting, abstinence and self-denial.

³⁶ The most influential theories of secularization were first developed by Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Doubleday, 1967) and Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (Macmillan, 1967). Subsequently Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1982); Rob Warner, *Secularization and Its Discontents* (Continuum, 2010), and Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁷ Beyond the problem of accommodation, we have to reckon with the captivity of persons, churches and entire denominational structures to the mindset of individualism, the privatization of spirituality, and the commodification of its religious goods and services.

³⁸ For a helpful discussion of this as a contemporary issue, see Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist* (Eerdmans, 1998).

³⁹ Wesley's basic arguments can be found in Sermon 79, "On Dissipation" (1783), Sermon 118, "On a Single Eye" (1789), Sermon 125, "On Living Without God" (1790), and his tract, "Thoughts Upon Dissipation" (1783), WJW 11:613-615.

⁴⁰ Sermon, "On Living Without God," ¶6-7. See "Thoughts Upon Dissipation," ¶5-7.

⁴¹ See Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm*, 2nd Edition (Oxford University Press, 1951), 590.

⁴² For Wesley's clearest treatment of the subject, see Sermon 37, "The Nature of Enthusiasm" (1750).

⁴³ Sermon, "On Dissipation," ¶15.

⁴⁴ Sermon, "On Dissipation," ¶18.

⁴⁵ Sermon, "On Dissipation," ¶20.

⁴⁶ This realization first came to Wesley in reading the work of Thomas a Kempis, Jeremy Taylor and William Law during his days in Oxford. They persuaded him that the traits of real Christianity are “simplicity of intention” and “purity of affection” (Wesley, “Plain Account of Christian Perfection”, ¶ 2-4, WJW 11:429; Sermon, “On a Single Eye,” ¶ 1). Only with such a “single eye” can Christians swim upstream and without which they are swept away. See his Letters to Lady Maxwell, 22 September 1764, and 25 May 1765, WJW 12:388-9.

⁴⁷ Hempton, *Methodism*, 201.

⁴⁸ John Hayward, “A General Model of Church Growth and Decline,” *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*, 29:3 (2005), 177-207; “Church Growth via Enthusiasts and Renewal,” presented at the 28th International System Dynamics Conference, Seoul, South Korea, 2010 (<https://www.churchmodel.org.uk/Church%20Growthforproc.pdf>; accessed 2 January 2019). Social epidemiology involves studying the social mechanisms for the spread of disease.

⁴⁹ Wesley’s general argument can be found in Sermon 4, “Scriptural Christianity” (1744); Sermons 23 & 24, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” Discourse 3 & 4 (1748); and Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel” (1783).

⁵⁰ Sermon, “Scriptural Christianity,” ¶ 5.

⁵¹ Sermon, “Scriptural Christianity,” §II.1.

⁵² Sermon, “Scriptural Christianity,” §II.8.

⁵³ Sermon, “Scriptural Christianity,” §IV.3-11. This sermon was preached before the University of Oxford, the birthplace of Methodism.

⁵⁴ Sermon, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” ¶ 13-17. See also, Sermon 102, “Of Former Times” (1787), ¶ 22.

⁵⁵ Sermon, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” ¶ 21-22. See also, Sermon, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” ¶ 32.

⁵⁶ Sermon, “Sermon on the Mount - Discourse 3,” §III.6-7.

⁵⁷ Sermon, “Sermon on the Mount - Discourse 4,” §I.7.

⁵⁸ Sermon, “Sermon on the Mount - Discourse 4,” §II.2.

⁵⁹ Sermon, “Sermon on the Mount - Discourse 4,” §I.8-9.

⁶⁰ I want to use the word spirit to mean something more like the “spirituality” of Methodism; that is, the human spirit made alive by the Holy Spirit.

⁶¹ The Methodist Church (Britain), *The Methodist Hymn Book* (Methodist Publishing House, 1933), iii. Made popular by the hymn of Brian Hoare, "Born in Song!" in The Methodist Church (Ed.), *Singing the Faith* (Canterbury Press, 2011), #21.

⁶² Preface to Wesley (Ed.), *Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists* (1780), ¶4, WJW 14:459.

⁶³ Preface to Wesley, *Collection of Hymns*, ¶8, WJW 14:461.

⁶⁴ Wesley, "Directions for Hymn Singing," ¶5, WJW 14:446.

⁶⁵ Hymn 196 in: John Wesley (Ed.), *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists* (1780). Hereafter, Hymn.

⁶⁶ Hymn 291.

⁶⁷ Hymn 262.

⁶⁸ Hymn 421.

⁶⁹ Hymn 442.

⁷⁰ Hymn 400.

⁷¹ Sermon 92, "On Zeal" (1781), ¶1.

⁷² Wesley claims to be indebted to a published sermon on zeal by Thomas Sprat (perhaps from 1682), then Bishop of Rochester.

⁷³ Sermon, "On Zeal," §I.3. Elsewhere in his works, Wesley describes Christian zeal as, among other things, "the flame of fervent love," "loving fire from heaven," "burning love," the "vigor of grace," being "fervent in spirit," and as the "essential ingredient of true religion."

⁷⁴ Sermon, "On Zeal," §II.4.

⁷⁵ Sermon, "On Zeal," §II.6-11.

⁷⁶ Sermon, "On Zeal," §II.6.

⁷⁷ Wesley did not scruple to name the General Rules of doing no harm, doing all the good we can, and attending to the ordinances of God, as "the righteousness of a Pharisee" (Sermon, "The More Excellent Way," §VI.5). The problem with the Pharisees was not that they had zeal, but that it was a "zeal without knowledge." Their zeal for the outward letter of the law, obscured the true inward spirit of the law. In other words, they exemplified a fatal inversion in the order of zeal laid out by Wesley.

⁷⁸ Wesley, Letter to Right Reverend Lord Bishop of Gloucester, §I.2-4, WJW 9:145-150.

⁷⁹ Sermon, “On Zeal,” §III.9. Wesley made it plain that works of piety must give way to mercy at love’s “almighty call,” to relieve the needs of our neighbor in body or soul (Sermon, “On Zeal,” §II.9). In this sense, if our works of piety are truly zealous, it will be proved in our works of mercy; and if our works of mercy are truly zealous, it will be proved by draw people to the God of love himself.

⁸⁰ Sermon, “Sermon on the Mount - Discourse 3,” §III.9.

⁸¹ Sermon 33, “Sermon on the Mount - Discourse 13” (1750), §III.4.

⁸² See Philip Meadows, “Mission Spirituality in the Early Methodist Preachers”, in: Robert Webster, *Perfecting Perfection* (Pickwick, 2015), 103-129.

⁸³ Thomas Jackson (Ed.), *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, 5th Edition, Vol.4 (Wesleyan-Methodist Book Room, 1865), 208. Hereafter, EMP.

⁸⁴ EMP 5:257.

⁸⁵ EMP 3:121.

⁸⁶ EMP 5:127.

⁸⁷ EMP 2:194.

⁸⁸ Wesley, Letters to Miss Bolton, November 7, 1771, WJW 12:433, and August 8, 1773, WJW 12:555.

⁸⁹ Wesley, Journal, 4 June 1772, WJW 3:466-7. Wesley also frequently observed that renewal of vitality followed the same pattern, in which the Spirit raised up a few leaders whose contagious zeal would spread from person to person and renew a whole society or local area.

⁹⁰ Wesley, Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, 15 September 1790, WJW 13:28.

⁹¹ Thomas Jackson (Ed.), “Minutes of Several Occasions” (1797), Q.2, WJW 8:325-6.

⁹² Antonio Romano, *Charism of the Founders* (St Paul’s, 1994), 29, 55.

⁹³ Romano, *Charism of the Founders*, 133, 143-4, 151-156.

⁹⁴ WJW 5:58.

⁹⁵ Romano, *Charism of the Founders*, 21.

⁹⁶ Romano, *Charism of the Founders*, 129.

⁹⁷ Romano, *Charism of the Founders*, 63, 140.

⁹⁸ Sermon 68, "The Wisdom of God's Counsels" (1784), ¶ 13.

⁹⁹ Sermon, "The Wisdom of God's Counsels," ¶ 14-15.

¹⁰⁰ Sermon, "The Wisdom of God's Counsels," ¶ 19-20.

¹⁰¹ EMP 4:88-90.

¹⁰² W.E. Sangster, *Methodism Can Be Born Again* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 14.

¹⁰³ Sangster, *Methodism Can Be Born Again*, 16.

¹⁰⁴ Sangster, *Methodism Can Be Born Again*, 27.

¹⁰⁵ Sangster, *Methodism Can Be Born Again*, 29, 31.

¹⁰⁶ Sangster, *Methodism Can Be Born Again*, 67, 112.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Charles Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart: And 1,501 Other Stories* (Word Publishing, 1998), 632. Classified under "Zeal". I am unsure of the precise origins of this story.

¹⁰⁸ Sermon, "On Dissipation," ¶ 15.

¹⁰⁹ Sermon 29, "Sermon on the Mount - Discourse 9" (1748), ¶ 7.

¹¹⁰ Sermon 51, "The Good Steward" (1768), §III.6.