

DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION IN THE WESLEYAN SPIRIT

Phil Meadows

“*Later in life, Wesley wrestled with a key missiological question: If the Christian gospel is the good news that every human being was made to hear, then why has Christianity made such slow progress around the world? His conclusion is startlingly simple, yet profoundly challenging. ‘The grand stumbling block’ to the spread of the gospel, he says, is ‘the lives of Christians’.*”

PHIL MEADOWS EXPLORES INSIGHTS FROM OUR WESLEYAN HERITAGE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MISSION: AN ACADEMIC PAPER, COMMISSIONED BY MET IN OUR SERIES TO MARK THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE TURNAROUND PLAN OF THE 1820 LIVERPOOL CONFERENCE.

There have been a number of unfolding and overlapping shifts in recent Western thinking about mission. First, the dominant understanding of mission as sending people overseas to pre-Christian cultures has been overshadowed by the need for missionary activity in our own emerging post-Christian context. The ‘Gospel and Our Culture’ movement has helped the church understand the Western world as a mission field, to which all the principles of cross-cultural mission can be applied.¹ A second shift has liberated the whole idea of mission from bondage to the inherited structures of the church. The ‘Missional Church’ movement has sought to address the challenge of domestic mission by letting the principles of cross-cultural engagement shape the development of culturally and contextually relevant expressions.² A third shift, which is presently gaining momentum, refocuses our attention from missional ecclesiology to mission spirituality, and makes authentic discipleship the heart of missional engagement.³

1. See George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (Eerdmans, 1996).
2. See Darrell Guder et al, *Missional Church* (Eerdmans, 1998), and Church of England, *Mission Shaped Church* (Church House, 2004).
3. See Roger Helland and Leonard Hjalmanson, *Missional Spirituality* (IVP, 2011). Alan and Debra Hirsch have claimed that ‘discipleship has become

From this perspective, it is not ‘churches’ but ‘people’ that participate in the mission of God. The world is not evangelised by structures, but by Spirit-filled and Jesus-shaped disciples who love God and neighbour. The aim of this paper is to survey some resources of Wesleyan theology and spirituality for points of contact with this evolving conversation about missional discipleship and its significance for the future of the Wesleyan movement today.

THE MISSION OF GOD

Neither Wesley, nor the early Methodist preachers, use the terminology of ‘mission’ as such, but they do speak about ‘the work of God’ and about being co-workers with God. This more directly biblical language perfectly captures the essence of the *missio Dei* as the activity of God in the world, and our participation in it. For Wesley, the work of God is fundamentally what God does to lead humanity through the whole way of salvation; by setting us free from sin, filling us with the divine life, and renewing us in holy love. There are two ‘grand branches’ to this work. On the one hand, there is the work that God has done for us in Christ, to forgive our sins and bring us into right relationship with the Father (i.e. justifying grace). On the other hand, there is the work that God does in us through the Spirit, setting us free from the power of sin, and conforming us to the likeness of Christ (i.e. sanctifying grace). The Spirit works preveniently in the hearts of all people, and plants an inner restlessness that can only be satisfied by this life-transforming work of God.

a frontier issue for the people of God at this time in history’ (*Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Baker, 2010), 23.

Through this divine initiative, we are enabled to be co-workers with God in our own salvation and in the salvation of others.⁴ First, we become co-workers with God as recipients of his mission, when we are caught up in the missional flow of God’s prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace. We are invited to ‘work out’ our own salvation, as the Spirit works in us ‘to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose’.⁵ Second, we are co-workers with God as participants in his mission, when the love and grace we have received reaches out to others in a life of witness and service. ‘For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do’.⁶ Wesley says, all ‘the children of God are ‘workers together with God’, in every good thought, or word, or action’.⁷ Third, those who are called to missional leadership,

4. Philip Meadows, ‘Entering the Divine Embrace: Towards an Ancient-Future Wesleyan Theology of Evangelism’, *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, 3 (2011), 3-30.
5. Philippians 2:12. See John Wesley, Sermon 85, ‘On Working Out Our Own Salvation’, in: *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, 3 (Abingdon, 1976–). Hereafter, BCE.
6. Ephesians 2:10. BCE 3, Sermon 98, ‘On Visiting the Sick,’ ¶12.
7. BCE 3, Sermon 72, ‘Of Evil Angels’, §11:9.

become ‘co-workers in God’s service’, through the activity of sowing, planting and watering the gospel in people’s lives.⁸ The early Methodist preacher-pioneers were frequently observed to have ‘the work of God at heart’, which overflowed in a zeal for the work of God in the hearts of others.⁹

MISSION SPIRITUALITY

Later in life, Wesley wrestled with a key missiological question: If the Christian gospel is the good news that every human being was made to hear, then why has Christianity made such slow progress around the world? His conclusion is startlingly simple, yet profoundly challenging: ‘The grand stumbling block’ to the spread of the gospel, he says, is ‘the lives of Christians’. He observes that the generality of those who call themselves Christians are not living proof of the gospel; since they lack the ‘power of religion’ in their hearts, and fail to embody the beauty of holiness in their lives. For Wesley, God’s chosen medium

8. 1 Corinthians 3:5-9
9. 2 Corinthians 6:1. See Philip Meadows, ‘Mission Spirituality in The Early Methodist Preachers’, in: Robert Webster, *Perfecting Perfection* (Wipf & Stock, 2015).

for the general spread of the gospel is the witness of ordinary people whose lives are made extraordinary by the holy love of God and neighbour. If the church would recover its vocation to be a holy people, non-Christians would ‘look upon them with other eyes, and begin to give attention to their words’. The ‘holy lives of Christians will be an argument they will not know how to resist’.¹⁰

Wesley narrates the origins and growth of Methodism to illustrate his point. From the gathering of a few young men in a ‘holy club’ at Oxford University, and starting a few small ‘societies’, there emerged a growing movement that would spread all around Great Britain, Ireland and America. The work of God began with a ‘mustard seed’ of hunger for God, that motivated a pursuit of holiness, and led to the experience of evangelical conversion and growth in grace. This seed then spread into ‘a large tree, and put forth great branches’; as others were invited onto the journey of holiness, and became living proof of the gospel in their own lives. Although Wesley saw the work of God ‘breaking

10. BCE 2, Sermon 63, ‘The General Spread of the Gospel’, ¶121.

out' in a 'shower' or 'torrent of grace' during seasons of revival, he concludes that 'in general...the kingdom of God 'will silently increase, wherever it is set up, and spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one kingdom to another'.¹¹

'Mission spirituality' has been defined as the work of God to draw all people to himself, in order to transform hearts and lives, then send them out as co-workers and contagious witnesses in the world.¹² From a Wesleyan perspective, mission spirituality has its source in the conscious experience of God's justifying and sanctifying grace, and is expressed in a way of life that is missional by nature. This inner wellspring of holy love overflows in the missional love of neighbour, motivated by a zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Michael Collins Reilly has helpfully concluded that 'all Christian spirituality must, in one way or another, be for mission'.¹³

MISSIONAL CHURCH

John Wesley left the Methodist movement with a cautionary prognosis about its future. He said, 'I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid that they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out'.¹⁴ Many suspect that this should now be taken as a diagnosis of contemporary Methodism, evidenced by a failure to reproduce the founding charisms which gave it birth.¹⁵ Churches may languish because they have invested more in the form of religion than the power of godliness; and rendered themselves impotent for renewal.

Reflecting on the purpose of church structure, Wesley asked, 'What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not

to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in His fear and love. Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is worth nothing'.¹⁶ Wesley adopted a pioneering approach to forms and structures; in which the true test of authenticity is fruitfulness in discipleship. I would argue that there is a difference between pioneering and pragmatic stances towards church structure.¹⁷ On the one hand, a pioneering approach begins with practices of disciple-making, and then allows effective structure to emerge providentially. The pioneers of early Methodism did not set out to plant societies that could make disciples, but to 'plant the gospel' and make disciples who needed, longed for, and gathered themselves into empowering community. On the other hand, a pragmatic approach begins with the business of revising structures in order to renew discipleship, and this is often done by imitating successful churches. Ironically, these models of 'success' have typically flourished through pioneering approaches to mission: creating and adapting structures to keep up with what God was doing providentially in their midst. In an attempt to reproduce this success, however, we tend to exchange a pioneering spirit for pragmatic solutions, by mimicking structures rather than the mission spirituality from which they arose. The danger with such pragmatism lies in reproducing new forms of nominalism, no matter how scientifically proven or culturally relevant they may be.

From this perspective, the way we 'do church' is to be valued only insofar as it functions as a means of grace, through which we become co-workers with God. If we invest disproportionately in the form of religion, we end up with power failure. If we invest extravagantly in the power of godliness, however, we are more likely to end up discipleship movement and church renewal.

11. Ibid, ¶17.

12. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana: 1990), ¶190.

13. Michael Collins Reilly, *Spirituality for Mission* (Mayknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978), 237.

14. Works 13:320. 'Thoughts Upon Methodism'.

15. See Scott Kisker, *Mainline of Methodist* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008), ch.1.

16. John Telford, *The Letters of John Wesley* (Epworth Press, 1931), 2:76. Hereafter, Letters.

17. Philip Meadows, "Embodying Conversion," in: Kenneth Collins & John Tyson (Eds), *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). In this chapter, I use Wesley's language of "prudential" rather than "pioneering" approaches, but the meaning is the same.



MISSIONAL LEADERSHIP

It is widely argued that mainline Methodism has been pre-occupied with maintaining structures rather than making disciples, and needs to recover its identity as a missional movement.¹⁸ On the one hand, the need to preserve denominational structures has made managerial competence an indispensable quality. On the other hand, the desire to preserve flagging membership has often turned pastoral ministry into a mixture of personal therapy and palliative care. Either way, holy living has been traded for cheap grace, and has concealed the radical demands of the gospel on daily life. We have tended to settle for spiritually impoverished lives, with an anaemic sense of God's presence, and little expectation of his power to transform.

Even where churches have tried to be more missional, they can end up repeating the same mistakes in new ways. We manage outreach programmes, relevant worship and fresh expressions without addressing the underlying nominalism and practical atheism that plagues ordinary Christian life. Or we run membership courses and discipleship programmes as quick fixes for renewing the church and trying to increase our confidence in the gospel. Examining the nature of early Methodism as a mission movement reminds us that discipleship is more caught than taught. It starts on the ground with ordinary people, desperate for God, who will do whatever it takes to become truly Jesus-shaped and Spirit-filled Christians. It grows when such people gather together in small groups, to help one another in the pursuit of holiness. And it spreads, as God keeps his promises, and grace abounds from heart to heart.¹⁹ 'Indeed, this I always observe,' says Wesley, that 'wherever a work of sanctification breaks out, the whole work of God prospers. Some are convinced of sin, others justified, and all stirred up to greater earnestness for salvation'.²⁰

18. See George Hunter, *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2011), and Gil Rendle, *Back to Zero: The Search to Rediscover the Methodist Movement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2011).

19. See Steve Addison, *Movements that Change the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011).

20. Works 4:56. Journal, 5 Aug 1775.

Cultivating the spirit of a movement, therefore, will mean raising up leaders who have a greater passion for making disciples than maintaining structures. Generally speaking, this kind of passion comes from leaders who are disciples themselves, and who delight in opportunities to mentor others in the way of Jesus.

MISSIONAL FORMATION

If mission is ultimately a spiritual issue, then spiritual formation for mission is the primary challenge. Drawing the threads of this paper together, we can identify four principles for developing the spiritual life of missional disciples in the hope of promoting a discipleship movement. It is not just each ingredient that is important, but the logic of disciple-making that exists between them.²¹

1. Seeking Holiness

Wesley claimed that God had raised up the Methodist movement 'to spread scriptural holiness over the land'.²² Further, he believed that the goal of 'Christian perfection' was the 'grand depositum' which God had given them to proclaim.²³ For Wesley, 'scripture perfection' can be defined as 'pure love filling the heart and governing all our words and actions'; or becoming like Jesus in heart and life.²⁴ Methodists are not those who have arrived at this goal, but 'any who sincerely follow after what they know they have not yet attained'.²⁵ Disciple-making leadership is not just about 'feeding the flock', but making them hungry for more of God. When those who live without God come into contact with a people whose lives are in the process of becoming radiant with the beauty of holiness, Wesley believed the truth of the gospel would be not only credible but attractive and compelling.²⁶ Becoming captivated by the vision of perfect love, as the promise

21. For a more detailed analysis, see Philip Meadows, *The Wesleyan DNA of Discipleship* (Grove, 2013). These represent some of the core principles of the Inspire Movement (<https://inspiremovement.org>).

22. Works 8:326. 'Minutes of Several Occasions'.

23. Letters 8:238. John Wesley, Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, September 1790.

24. Works 11:469.

25. Works 8:384.

26. BCE 1, Sermon 24, 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse 4', §IV:1-3.

of a Jesus-shaped and Spirit-filled life, is what motivates the pursuit of holiness.

2. Spiritual Discipline

Wesley encouraged the early Methodists to pursue scriptural holiness through taking up the practices of spiritual discipline as 'means of grace', by which our life-transforming communion with God is entered and deepened.²⁷ These means include 'works of piety'; such as prayer, searching the Scriptures, participating in the Lord's Supper, and fasting or abstinence. They also include 'works of mercy'; which include caring for others in body, such as visiting the sick, and in soul, by 'awakening sinners' and 'contributing in any manner to the saving of souls from death'.²⁸ Disciple-making leadership is not just about 'doing ministry' for others, but also equipping disciples for a life of intimacy with Jesus, and responsiveness to his Spirit in daily life. As missional practices, works of piety and mercy involve us in a movement of divine grace that fills, transforms and overflows our lives with love of God and neighbour. They are also called 'good works' insofar as we become co-workers with God through them: in working out our own salvation and working for the salvation of others.

3. Sharing Fellowship

It takes deep spiritual friendships to help us maintain a life of spiritual discipline, and keep us intentional about the pursuit of holiness. Wesley taught the early Methodists that there was no such thing as 'solitary Christianity' because the inevitability of spiritual dissipation, the temptation to quit and the deceitfulness of the human heart, are all too great to overcome by ourselves.²⁹ The core purpose of Methodist society was 'to watch over one another in love',³⁰ so they might 'help each other to work out their salvation'.³¹ The societies were subdivided into small groups of around twelve people called 'class meetings',³² who held one another accountable, and helped one another respond more faithfully to the movements of divine

27. BCE 1, Sermon 16, 'The Means of Grace'.

28. BCE 2, Sermon 43, 'The Scripture Way of Salvation', §III:10.

29. Works 14:437.

30. Hebrews 13:17.

31. Philippians 2:12.

32. Works 8:269f.

grace. Those who hungered for greater intimacy and spiritual maturity were gathered into even smaller groups of three or more, called 'bands', arranged by age and sex.³³ Disciple-making leadership is not just about 'attracting crowds', but investing in the formation of deep spiritual friendships, a few at a time, for the sake of deep and lasting growth. As missional practices, mutual accountability and group spiritual direction make us more attentive to the presence of Jesus, and more responsive to the leading of his Spirit, in the ordinary flow of everyday life.

4. Everyday Mission

Seeking holiness, spiritual discipline, and sharing fellowship all contribute to a God-centred life that is missional by nature. From a Wesleyan perspective, mission is best understood as the character of a holy people who are set apart for God and sent out into the world to live and work for his praise and glory. The ethos of everyday mission is embodied in what Wesley called 'social holiness'; meaning that every Christian disciple is embedded in a nexus of personal relationships through which the life, love and grace of God may be revealed. He says, '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 be communicated to others'.³⁴ The spirit of everyday mission is also encapsulated in Wesley's principle of 'good stewardship', which demands that we become ever more fully surrendered to God's purposes.³⁵

CONCLUSION

The spiritual life is a gift, not to be owned and possessed, but to be enjoyed in the process of giving it back to God, in the service of others. Disciple-making leadership is not just about developing 'mission strategies', but raising up everyday missionaries, who give up

33. Works 8:274f. For a contemporary innovation of the band meeting, see Philip Meadows & Anthony Watts, *The Fellowship Band: A Quick Guide* (Inspire Movement Publishing, 2019) and Philip Meadows, *Fellowship Bands: Spiritual Formation for Everyday Missionaries* (Inspire Movement Publishing, 2019).

34. BCE 1, Sermon 24, 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse 4', §I:7.

35. BCE 2, Sermon 51, 'The Good Steward'.

their lives to God, and lay down their lives for others. As missional practices, social holiness and good stewardship shape a way of life that impacts others as occasion demands, in the here and now of daily life, one act of mercy at a time.

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MAY THE MIND OF CHRIST MY SAVIOUR

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live in me from day to day,
by his love and power controlling
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May the word of God dwell richly
in my heart from hour to hour,
so that all may see I triumph
only through his power.

May the peace of God my Father
rule my life in everything,
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sick and sorrowing.

May the love of Jesus fill me,
as the waters fill the sea;
him exalting, self abasing -
this is victory.

May I run the race before me,
Strong and brave to face the foe,
Looking only unto Jesus
As I onward go.

Katie Barclay Wilkinson (1859-1928)