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MERCY  
IMMENSE AND FREE

*Essays on Wesley and Wesleyan Theology*

REVISED EDITION

Victor A. Shepherd



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## AN INTRODUCTION TO JOHN WESLEY

### *The Man, His Times and His Faith*

John Wesley captured hearts, heads and hands as few other Christian leaders have been able to do. For this reason the movement bearing his name flared rapidly into a fire like that of Pentecost—warming, cheering, illuminating, purifying, and above all igniting whatever it touched as he and his descendants embodied the Good News wherever they went. The United Church of Canada could never have come forth without him; Methodists predominated in the 1925 union that created the church.

The public good in Canada is unthinkable without him. His spiritual descendants—Egerton Ryerson, for example—gave birth to public education in Canada, a huge advance on Britain's class-system with its invisible ceilings condemning most people to material bleakness. The benefits Canadians sometimes take for granted—like assistance for impoverished immigrants, public health programs and universal medical care—are the legacy of Prairie Methodists like James S. Woodsworth and Dolly McGuire. Our debt is colossal.

We came perilously close to being deprived of him. In 1709, the rectory in which he lived with his family—Wesley was the fifteenth of nineteen

children—caught fire. A human pyramid lifted the six-year-old to safety seconds before the second-storey balcony on which he had been huddling collapsed. Thereafter he always referred to himself as “a brand plucked from the fire” (Zech. 3:2).

In his lifetime he would travel 400,000 km on horseback and preach 40,000 times. Having declared, “I love the poor,” he would also pour himself out for the people whom he championed zealously.

See him at age 81. He has been trudging from door to door for four days straight, begging money. It is wintertime, his diary tells us, and his feet have been immersed from morning to night in slush. He stops begging at the end of the fourth day, not because he has managed to raise 200 pounds but because he has been overtaken by a “violent flux.” (Today we’d say diarrhea.) Only his own sickness stops him “wasting” himself for those needier still.

He expected as much from his people in the New World, and they gave it gladly. Of the first 737 Methodist preachers in North America, fifty percent died before they were thirty years of age. Two-thirds didn’t live long enough to serve twelve years. Hardship? His people were trailblazers as surely as was Jesus Christ before them, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2).

Methodism began as a renewal movement within the Anglican Church. After Wesley’s death, a denomination emerged. In Canada, Methodists subsequently merged with Presbyterians and Congregationalists. How will it all end? The answer has everything to do with what “it” is now.

Wesley’s preoccupation with love was intimately tied to his understanding of the Christian life. Christian existence, he insisted, is a life of self-forgetful love for God and neighbour as Christ’s people abandon themselves to serve those who suffer atrociously, are customarily forsaken, and too often are near-friendless.

Here his eschatological approach differed from Roman Catholicism, for instance, whose people traditionally emphasize sight: in the eschaton we shall see God in a beatific vision that finally brings into focus all we’ve found fuzzy.

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John Calvin's descendants emphasize knowledge: while we know but in part throughout our earthly sojourn, in the eschaton we shall know God in a way that dispels all doubt and corrects all misapprehension.

While embracing truth wherever he found it, Wesley nonetheless insisted that our vision of God and our knowledge of God would be gathered up and crowned eschatologically in our love for God as finally we were "lost in wonder, love and praise." For this reason he cherished John's first epistle just because it tolled relentlessly the love wherewith God loves us and the love whereby we must love one another.

In his famous tract, "The Almost Christian," Wesley explores what unbelievers lack specifically when they lack faith generally. You expect him to say right off that believers are marked chiefly by faith in God. Instead he says that believers are those who love God.

Of course, Wesley believed that faith marks the "faithful," binds us to Jesus Christ. Yet he was always leery of those who claimed to serve God and obey God without ever loving God. For this reason he insisted that there is no faith in God without a simultaneous love for God, and equally no love for God without faith in God.

"No love without faith." Faith is a matter of trusting the provision God has made in the cross for rebel sinners. Our estrangement from God disappears only as God absorbs it in the cross and thereby opens the way to our homecoming.

"No faith without love." All around him in eighteenth-century England, Wesley saw serious, sincere people whose theology was orthodox even as no warmth had ever thawed their icy hearts or unlocked their frozen lives. Wesley dismissed such so-called faith as self-congratulatory.

For Wesley, faith in God and love for God penetrated, implied and interpreted each other. His preoccupation with love admitted that while faith would give way to sight, and hope to hope's fulfilment, love would give way to nothing—except more love, forever and ever.

Of all the misunderstandings that falsify Wesley and his spiritual descendants, none is more defamatory than the assumption that the Methodist tradition doesn't think. While it is readily acknowledged that the Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox families

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within the church catholic think and have always thought, Methodism, it is sometimes said, merely emotes.

Wesley contradicts this. Having insisted that his lay preachers study five hours per day, he studied more himself. He authored grammar textbooks in seven of the eight foreign languages he knew.

He deplored as narrow, ignorant and foolish the suggestion that preachers need read only one book. Such fanaticism meant that reading only the Bible guaranteed misreading it. Those who complained of having “no taste for reading” he rebuked on the spot: “Contract a taste for it by use, or return to your trade”—and watched more than a few preachers move back to farm, shop or mine.

His reading was as broad as it was deep. No area of intellectual endeavour escaped him. All his life he kept abreast of contemporary explorations in natural science. Schooled in classical philosophy at Oxford, he probed the contemporary empiricist thinking of John Locke. Aware that history is a theatre both of God’s activity and of the church’s response, he wrote a world history.

All his life Wesley eschewed mental laziness as he eschewed little else. Sleeping no more than six hours per night and arising each morning at four, he spent the freshest hours of the day expanding his mind, expecting all Methodists, but preachers especially, to follow him. To this end he brought together fifty books in his Christian Library, regarding them essential to the intellectual formation of his people. Methodism loves God with the mind.

After May 24, 1738, when he “felt my heart strangely warmed” in the course of hearing Luther’s Commentary on Romans read at worship, he knew that justification by faith—free forgiveness of sins, rooted in God’s mercy, without consideration for human merit—is the beginning and the stable basis of the Christian life. Unhesitatingly he announced that where justification isn’t upheld, the church doesn’t exist. In 1766 he was still declaring, “I believe justification by faith alone as much as I believe there is a God.”

Still, he did not take church tradition lightly. He saw it as a storehouse of wisdom from which sorely pressed and perplexed Christians



could draw. Wesley knew that a church that disdains Christian memory resembles a sailing ship without a keel. Without one, a ship can only be driven before the prevailing wind. With a keel, the boat can sail across the wind or even against it. Wesley knew that his movement, opposed by magistrates, merchants, and ecclesiastical officialdom, had to be able to use unfavourable winds if it was going to make headway.

In the same theological spirit, Wesley bridged West and East. For instance, the Western church, both Reformed and Roman, had understood original sin largely in terms of a massive original guilt that was somehow transmitted to posterity. The Orthodox churches understood it as the introduction of death, inward corruption, and loss of the Holy Spirit. Wesley preferred the latter without denying everything of the former.

Wesley remains the figure in the Protestant orbit who can “dance” with virtually anyone in the Christian family. Appreciating the East (especially the Eastern Fathers, whose luminary, Athanasius, Wesley always preferred to the West’s Augustine), he also included in his Christian Library eight works by Roman Catholic mystics from the Counter Reformation. While the sixteenth-century Reformers had denied fasting as a means of grace (Zwingli, the leader of the Reformation in Zurich, had eaten sausages in Lent to publicize his disavowal of fasting), Wesley unambiguously declared it to be a means of grace, fasting weekly himself and urging his people to follow him.

Wesley’s assertion that “the world is my parish” was no exaggeration. His theology was as wide as the world he knew God to love, and as deep as the sin he knew God to redeem.

Glad to identify himself with the wider church, Wesley characteristically moved his people to “holiness of heart and life.” Always suspicious of a Christian understanding of forgiveness that relieved people of sin’s guilt but left them in its grip, he judiciously matched “relief” with “release.” The habituated (all sin is addictive) could know deliverance.

The habituation was not imagined. By 1750 England’s annual per capita (children included) consumption of gin stood at more than ten

litres.<sup>1</sup> Intoxicated children, even children with delerium tremens, were a common sight. The infant death rate, already high due to disease, skyrocketed on account of neglect. Of the 2,000 houses in St. Giles, London, 506 were gin shops.

Parliament often foreshortened its debates "because the honourable members were too drunk to continue the affairs of state." Gambling took down rich and poor alike. The degeneration accompanying all of this need not be detailed. Its dimensions are sufficiently attested in one advertisement, "Champagne, Dice, Music, or your Neighbour's Spouse." Wesley knew that something more than forgiveness was needed. It was his conviction, and soon his people's experience, that God could do something with sin beyond forgiving it.

"Holiness of heart and life," then, was yet another of the balances that Wesley maintained judiciously. Holiness of heart is release from inner evil tempers or dispositions. Holiness of life is release from evil conduct—believers, now freed, "do the truth." Both are needed. Holiness of life alone is self-serving legalism wherein a reputation is gained that is not deserved. Holiness of heart alone is self-indulgent, religious romanticism.

In Wesley's era all Christians agreed that "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). All Christians similarly agreed that Christ's people would be delivered "in the instant of death." Since Christ's people are going to be delivered in the moment of transition, Wesley contended, why not in this life? Why not now? To say that we are not going to be delivered until the "instant" is to doom the habituated to lifelong addiction.

Aware that God's commands are all "covered promises," and noticing that the root command in Scripture is "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), Wesley discerned that the "uncovered" promise of God was the unblemished, perfected holi-

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1. Statistics and quotations in the following paragraphs are taken from J.W. Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938).

ness of God's people. Such a deliverance was the grand, overarching promise that guaranteed the fulfilment of all other promises. For this reason Wesley was fond of saying that all of Scripture was "one grand promise" that remedied all the ravages of the Fall and rendered God's people resplendent.

Unlike many of his successors, Wesley insisted that the promise of the Gospel had to be announced in the spirit of the Gospel. People were to be drawn, not driven, to the Gospel. God's promise had to be heard not as a threat, not even as an announcement, but as winsome, attractive, comely. This "Christian Perfection" was nothing less than perfection in love. People would forget their self-preoccupation in the immensity of God's love and the immediacy of their neighbour's need.

Without the experience of deliverance now—known, enjoyed, commended to others—Wesleyanism would have been stillborn.

Wesley's efforts on behalf of disadvantaged people are almost the stuff of legend. His heart convulsed at the spectacle of the poor people won to the Methodist movement. Poor people, he knew, are more frequently ill and more wretchedly ill than the socially advantaged, and have less access to treatment. Quickly Wesley gathered to himself a surgeon and an apothecary. He paid for their services by scrounging money wherever he could. In the first five months of his program, the apothecary distributed free drugs to 500 people. By 1746 Wesley had established London's first free pharmacy.

He acquainted himself with the latest in pharmaceuticals, and recorded his findings in the aptly titled *Primitive Physic* (1747). In a pre-analgesic era, his trademark cure for headache was: "Pour upon the palm of the hand a little brandy and a zest of lemon, and hold it to the forehead." His remedy for the relief of protracted psychotic depression was a crude form of electro-convulsive therapy. Wesley placed an electrode on either side of a patient's head, and then cranked a handle to shock sufferers with static electricity. At least he had recognized that non-situational depression was rooted neither in defective faith nor in demonic possession.

Wesley was distressed by the predicament of aged widows, most of whom had survived scarcity while their husbands were alive, only to

stare at the spectre of death by starvation, exposure or loneliness in their widowhood. He purchased houses for these women and refurbished them “so as to be warm and clean.” So that the widows who lived in them did not feel demeaned as charity cases, Wesley often ate the food they ate, from the tables at which they sat. He also informed his preachers that if they wanted to avoid dismissal they should do the same.

When bankers refused to lend money to Methodists who wanted to start up small businesses, Wesley scabbled fifty pounds and dispensed small loans. Later, those who had borrowed were themselves able to lend money to his “bank” so that the next wave could be helped. In the first year he helped 250 people make a fresh financial start.

Aware that education admits people to a world otherwise inaccessible, Wesley developed the Kingswood School. Early on, it educated the children of coal miners and straitened Methodist preachers; it operates to this day.

Yet Wesley’s zeal for social betterment didn’t come from British radicals who wanted to destroy social order. The “Levellers,” as reformers rooted in the seventeenth century were labeled, had never persuaded Wesley, a Tory, that their agenda was sound. Instead, the Kingdom of God—present, operative, crying out for visibility—was the corrective lens through which Wesley saw creation transfigured as “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

Tirelessly, Wesley urged his people, “Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can.”<sup>2</sup> When he drew thirty pounds per year as an Anglican priest, he lived on twenty-eight and gave away two. When book royalties boosted his income to 120 pounds, he lived on twenty-eight and gave away ninety-two. Wesley never understood hoarding. While he agreed

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2. At age 86, Wesley lamented that his people were wonderfully adept at the first two yet pathetically indifferent to the third. In his frustration he fumed, “And yet nothing can be more plain than that all who observe the first two rules without the third will be twofold more the children of hell than they were before” (Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicennial Ed.); (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), vol. 4, p. 91. Hereafter cited as *WJW*, 4.91.

that the scriptural text pronounced the love of money to be the root of all evil, he maintained that no one could hang on to superfluous cash without coming to love it—and perpetrate the evil it guaranteed.

In all of this he was aware that it's always difficult to help without degrading those helped. Wanting to assist poor women by means of something other than "cold charity," he purchased yards of the fine black cloth that people normally bought to cover church windows for their funerals. Then he informed his assistants that they were to have the cloth sewn into elegant dresses and given to women who would otherwise never be able to afford a good outfit.

Small group nurture was the heart of the Methodist movement. While Wesley is often associated with huge outdoor gatherings, he spoke far more frequently to smaller congregations that provided a setting for mutual confrontation, correction and encouragement.

The "Society," the largest grouping, consisted of all the Methodists in a city or town or village. In the "Class," people were gathered into "twelves" according to their geographical proximity to each other. The "Band" was the smallest of all.

"Classes" were the most comprehensive. Mothers and miners met each other, shopkeepers and soldiers, the learned and the unlettered, young and old, prominent and penurious. Each class met once a week under the supervision of a leader. The only condition for membership was "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins. But wherever this is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits."<sup>3</sup>

The first fruit was "doing no harm, and avoiding evil of every kind"—including "the using of many words in buying or selling" and "softness, and needless self-indulgence."

The second fruit was "doing good"—feeding the hungry, clothing the ill-clad, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Not to be overlooked, however,

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3. For the details of the nature, purpose and rules of the classes and bands see Wesley, *WJW*, vol. 9, "The Methodist Societies: History, Nature and Design," ch. 3 and 4.

was “submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world.”

The third fruit was “attending upon all the ordinances of God”—public worship, private prayer, and fasting every Friday.

“Bands” differed significantly. They were made up of only four or five people organized according to occupation (sailors, seamstresses, labourers, for example); or organized according to desperate need (alcoholics, gamblers, “whoremongers.”) The bands had to be gender-segregated in light of the frank confession essential to them. The purpose was to “Confess your faults to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed.” (James 5:16) The rules of the bands, drawn up on Christmas Day, 1738, suggest a self-disclosure that couldn’t be cloaked. For example:

Rule 7: “Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?”

Rule 9: “Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?”

Rule 11: “Is it your desire and design to be on this and all other occasions entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart, without exception, without disguise and without reserve?”

And then there was the question that Wesley insisted be put to every band-member at every meeting: “Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?”

The confrontation was severe. Yet Wesley knew that love worthy of the name has to scorch, or else it is nothing more than a polite indulgence which finally profits no one.

While public worship was essential to the spiritual health of his people, Wesley, unlike most evangelists, insisted especially on Holy Communion. It was nothing less than God’s command. All who neglected it were disobedient or foolish. When some people complained that they weren’t worthy, Wesley told them that Christ’s mercy eclipsed all considerations

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of merit. When others returned from the communion rail complaining that they didn't feel any different, he was quick with five benefits:

- we are strengthened “insensibly”;
- we are made more fit for the service of God;
- we are made more constant in the service of God;
- we are kept from backsliding;
- we are spared many temptations.

For Wesley, to receive Holy Communion was to receive Christ himself.

The small man (5'4," 120 pounds) had feet of clay. All his life he lacked self-knowledge, particularly in his relations with women. He was autocratic. Often he irked his brother Charles. He could spew sarcasm. Still, he was wonderfully used of God. He was living proof of Luther's dictum: “God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick.” In fair days and foul he never ceased having a heart as big as a house for sinning, suffering, sorrowing humankind.

Wesley was evidence of two miracles: first, that someone of his social and educational station could communicate with the disadvantaged. Second—and the greater miracle—was that he wanted to.

It is little wonder, then, that when the 86-year-old visited Falmouth and was showered with gratitude and love by mobs who had abused him forty years earlier, he jotted in his journal: “High and low now lined the street... out of stark love and kindness, gaping and staring as if the King were going by.”<sup>4</sup>

He was not the king. He was, however, a very great ambassador.

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4. Wesley, *WJW*, Vol. 24: Journals and Diaries VII (1787–1791), p. 151: Aug. 17, 1789.