

“Holiness of Heart and Life”

Unity, Holiness, and the Mission of Methodism

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Introduction

As The United Methodist Church appeared to be speeding toward division at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon, the Council of Bishops of The UMC intervened at the eleventh hour in a last ditch effort to stave off division. In a statement read by Bishop Bruce Ough, the bishops urged the church to fight for unity:

We believe that our unity is found in Jesus Christ; it is not something we achieve but something we receive as a gift from God. We understand that part of our role as bishops is to lead the church toward new behaviors, a new way of being and new forms and structures which allow a unity of our mission of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” while allowing for differing expressions as a global church. Developing such new forms will require a concerted effort by all of us, and we your bishops commit ourselves to lead this effort. We ask you, as a General Conference, to affirm your own commitment to maintaining and strengthening the unity of the church. We will coordinate this work with the various efforts already underway to develop global structures and a new General Book of Discipline for our church. Strengthening the unity of the church is a responsibility for all of us.¹

Beginning with the substantive theological affirmation that unity is a gift from God that is found in Jesus Christ, the statement quickly pivoted to the ways the bishops would seem to create unity through their work. The bishops would lead “the church toward new behaviors, a new way of being and new forms and structures which allow a unity of our mission of ‘making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world’ while allowing different expressions as a global church.” They also took ownership of leading the “concerted effort” that would be required in this effort. The General Conference was then asked to commit “to maintaining and strengthening the unity of the church.” The energy behind the statement certainly seemed to be that, in this moment of crisis, the bishops of the church had the collective will and power to reunite a deeply divided church. United Methodism, it appeared, would be unified through “new behaviors, new ways of being, new forms, and differing expression” more clearly than the way the statement began.²

The bishops’ statement on unity illustrates what has been a common strategy throughout United Methodism’s nearly fifty-year history. When the tensions in United Methodism’s big-tent experiment reach a breaking point, leaders often shift from the particularity of Methodism’s distinctive mission of “spreading scriptural holiness” or today, “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” to the more generic value of unity. This has been expressed with particular persistence and urgency in the variety of proposals that passionately call for unity, despite understandings of holiness that are incompatible with one another.

Put differently, the current mission of United Methodism to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” cannot get off the ground without a specific vision of what

Christian faithfulness looks like (and does not look like). The assumption of the bishops' statement, however, seems to be that unity that includes this kind of specificity is impossible, as they specifically call for a "unity of mission" with "different expressions."³ It appears, then, that United Methodism's mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ may have, itself, become a barrier to unity. And so, in keeping with United Methodism's big-tent experiment, the church seeks unity through divergent understandings of discipleship. The General Conference statement from United Methodism's bishops reveals two different ways of thinking about unity within contemporary United Methodism. One sees unity as coming through embracing the gift of theological diversity. The other sees unity as coming through a corporate pursuit of holiness, which requires specificity about agreed upon Christian practices.

The bishops' statement does not make this explicit, but given that disagreement about same-gender marriage is the presenting issue, "different expressions" seems to suggest different understandings of whether same-gender marriage can be an expression of holiness as the best way to receive the gift of unity from God through faith in Jesus Christ.

This paper asks whether these two approaches to unity are compatible with each other. Can they coexist in one expression of the church? Ought they to coexist in a particular denomination? The primary question can be framed more precisely as: Are unity and profound disagreement on holy living possible in the Wesleyan vision of the Christian life? This question is proposed as an historical question, seeking a close reading of the most relevant sources in John Wesley's corpus.⁴ John Wesley continues to be regularly cited in conversations about contemporary United Methodism from a wide variety of perspectives. This paper seeks precision about the degree to which theological diversity is to be embraced within a faith community, and how holiness is prioritized in thinking about the common and laudable desire to avoid division. The core argument is that, for Wesley, unity is the product of a commitment to a particular doctrine and discipline. In several respects, Wesley has a remarkably open and generous understanding of the boundaries within which Christians can coexist when there is disagreement. He also requires that Christians work diligently to avoid sowing seeds of disunity. In other respects, Wesley is quite uncompromising and sees division or separation as not only permissible but required. This paper outlines the importance that Wesley places on unity and holiness. It is ultimately concluded that in the midst of a deep disagreement about what holiness looks like, Wesley cannot be used accurately as a resource in support of a vision of unity that requires affirming opposing understandings of practical holiness. A church with two different conceptions of holiness, in Wesley's view, is already in schism.

Unity and Diversity

The main sources where Methodists have found the value of unity in the midst of theological diversity in Wesley's writings are in his sermons. This value was amplified by Albert Outler's work as the editor of the sermons for the *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. Outler has been so influential in the interpretation of John Wesley in contemporary United Methodism, that there is an initial challenge when considering the role of unity in John Wesley's thinking in sorting out Albert Outler's interpretation of Wesley from Wesley himself.⁵ In the introduction to "A Caution against Bigotry," Outler described the sermon as "a positive, if also indirect, plea for a carefully considered religious pluralism both in theology and praxis."⁶ In his introduction to one of Wesley's most popular sermons in the last several decades, "Catholic Spirit," Outler wrote that "Catholic Spirit" was Wesley's

. . . most formal articulation of this nondogmatic method in theology. In it we find yet another statement of “essentials”—and it goes with his method that Wesley believes he could presuppose a consensus here. Then we come to Wesley’s effort to redeem controversy in general by the spirit of Christian love and forbearance. Given clarity as to the essentials and liberty as to “opinions,” he is glad for Methodists “to think and let think.” Here, then, is a charter for a distinctive sort of doctrinal pluralism—one that stands at an equal distance from dogmatism on the one extreme and indifferentism on the other.⁷

Outler sees Wesley’s frequent distinction between essentials and opinions as inspiring and warranting a big-tent vision for Methodism. Is that what Wesley himself was trying to do in these sermons?

“Catholic Spirit” is the best-known sermon by Wesley that has been used as a warrant for the vision of unity in theological diversity. Wesley begins the sermon with the duty to love that is binding on all Christians. He starts with a wide lens: “love is due to all mankind.” He begins to narrow the focus, with a heightened responsibility: “There is a peculiar love which we owe to those that love God.” This “peculiar love” frames the problem that the sermon addresses:

All men approve of this. But do all men practise it? Daily experience shows the contrary. Where are even the Christians who “love one another, as he hath given us commandment”? How many hindrances lie in the way! The two grand, general hindrances are, first, that they can’t all think alike and in consequence of this, secondly, they can’t all walk alike; but in several smaller points their practice must differ in proportion to the difference of their sentiments.⁸

Wesley then offers his prescription: “Though we can’t think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?” For Wesley, the answer to both questions is clearly affirmative. “Without all doubt we may.”⁹

Wesley then organizes the sermon around two questions, which are inspired by 2 Kings 10:15 (KJV): “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?” And, “If it be, give me thine hand.” The first part of this question, in popular Methodist appeals to this sermon, has often been taken as a kind of abstract way of asking: Do we have good intentions to be nice and get along with each other? Wesley, however, frames the question of right hearts in a more precise way. He asks, “What is properly implied in the question?” He answers by asking whether the person’s heart is right with God (which is followed by a kind of creedal litany of rhetorical questions, like “Having absolutely disclaimed all thy own works, thy own righteousness, hast thou ‘submitted thyself unto the righteousness of God’, ‘which is by faith in Christ Jesus’?) and with his or her neighbor.¹⁰ For Wesley, then, the question “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?” is not so much a question about how we feel toward each other, but whether we are united in a common pursuit of the Greatest Commandment to love God and others.

Assuming that all of the previous questions have been answered in the affirmative, Wesley proceeds to the second part of the sermon, “If it be, give me thine hand.” It is obvious, but worth making explicit, that the logic of the sermon is that people cannot join hands if any of the previous questions are not answered in the affirmative. In other words, within the sermon itself, there is a much higher bar for this broad unity than has typically been recognized. Assuming this hurdle is cleared, what does Wesley mean by “give me thine hand”? Wesley lists love, active prayer, provoking to love, and good works as the content of “give me thine hand,” amplifying love with a final call to “love me not in word only, but in deed and in truth.”¹¹

Perhaps most problematic for using “Catholic Spirit” as warrant for a vision for wide-ranging theological diversity is the last part of the sermon. After having addressed the two crucial aspects he said he would discuss, Wesley included a final section that sought to proactively prevent misunderstandings of the concept of a “catholic spirit.” He wrote, “There is scarce any expression which has been more grossly misunderstood and more dangerously misapplied than this.”¹² In order to prevent this, Wesley clarifies that a catholic spirit is not “speculative latitudinarianism” (indifference to all opinions). Wesley describes this as “the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven.” A person with a “truly catholic spirit” is “fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine.” And those who have “no settled, consistent principles” are, according to Wesley, “nearer the spirit of antichrist” than the spirit of Christ or a “truly catholic spirit.”¹³ Wesley uses similarly strong language to clarify that a catholic spirit is not “practical latitudinarianism” (an indifference to public worship and how it is conducted) or an “indifference to all congregations.”¹⁴

One of the last paragraphs of the sermon offers a crucial insight into how it should be interpreted:

But while he is steadily fixed in his religious principles, in what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus; while he firmly adheres to that worship of God which he judges to be most acceptable in his sight; and while he is united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation; his heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love. And he that has this is of a catholic spirit. For love alone gives the title to this character—catholic love is a catholic spirit.¹⁵

Wesley wants Methodists, and all Christians, to be charitable toward one another. This is, for Wesley, a basic requirement of Christian faith. The burden of the sermon is to encourage Christians to love one another even though they disagree in matters of theology and practice. This insistence on the fundamental importance of love comes from his understanding of holiness. The crucial question, then, becomes: Was “Catholic Spirit” describing how Methodists could get along with other Methodists when they disagreed?

At the beginning and the end of the sermon, Wesley offers cues that make it clear that he was not envisioning disagreement within a particular branch of the church catholic. Rather, it is a vision for how members across the body of Christ can love one another well and look for ways to cooperate, even though there are ongoing reasons why they cannot be unified in common ministry. In the extended passage just cited, Wesley describes a person who is firmly located within a particular ecclesial community and, from that commitment, looks out to other parts of Christianity and humanity in general.

In the introduction to the sermon, the sentence before the famous line “though we can’t think alike, may we not love alike?” says, “But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship *may prevent an entire external union*, yet need it prevent our union in affection?”¹⁶ Wesley was writing to people who were prevented from having an external union with one another because of their disagreements. In other words, the sermon was urging Methodists to love non-Methodist Christians, not help Methodists stay together when they realized they fundamentally disagreed on what holy living looked like, which would, on Wesley’s account “prevent an entire external union.” Methodists have made the mistake of using this sermon to address their own internal theological incoherence and divisions around Christian practice. Used in this way, the sermon ends up underwriting the very “gross misunderstandings” and “dangerous misapplications” that

Wesley worried about, as it encourages the formation of a particular faith community that lacks clarity and precision around Christian doctrine and discipline. “Catholic Spirit” addressed the ways that Methodists can, and should, engage Christians beyond Methodism. This is where its legitimate and fruitful application can be found. As such, it cannot be used in support of the vision for unity lifted up by the United Methodist Council of Bishops at the 2016 General Conference.

Another important, though less frequently cited, sermon is “A Caution against Bigotry,” which immediately preceded “Catholic Spirit” in *Sermons on Several Occasions*. The sermon is structured around Mark 9:38-39, where the disciples tell Jesus they forbid someone who was not one of them from casting out devils in Jesus’ name. The thrust of the sermon argues that people who are doing God’s work should not be hindered from doing so, even if they are widely divergent from Methodists in their beliefs and practice. Wesley goes as far in the sermon as to include a church “we account to be in many respects antisciptural and antichristian.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, a close reading of this sermon shows that, like “Catholic Spirit,” this sermon is not a vision for how wide of an array of theological and ethical practices can be included within Methodism. The sermon is addressing how Methodists (or other Christians) can avoid bigotry toward other Christian communities. This is most clearly seen when discussing the ways in which someone may “differ from us . . . not only in opinion, but likewise in some points of practice.”¹⁸ He concludes that summary, “The unavoidable consequence of any of these differences will be that *he who thus differs from us must separate himself with regard to those points from our society*. In this respect therefore ‘he followeth not us;’ he is ‘not (as we phrase it) of our church’.”¹⁹ The sermon is not calling Methodists to stay together, despite differences in belief and practice. Rather, it is calling them to be humble enough to see God’s work in other faith communities when something is clearly a work of God.²⁰ In this respect, Outler has incorrectly labeled this sermon as “a carefully considered religious pluralism both in theology and praxis.” The vision to extend the tent poles of Methodism as far apart as possible is Outler’s vision, not Wesley’s. In “Catholic Spirit” and “A Caution against Bigotry,” Wesley was working to provide a way for Christians across confessional boundaries to be charitable toward one another and, at the very least, avoid actively interfering with God’s work.

Unity and Schism

Wesley was passionate about Christians loving one another across divisions related to belief and practice and being humble enough to recognize God’s work outside their particular communities. But what did he think about divisions within a community? Was division to be avoided at all cost? Or were there circumstances that made division permissible, even necessary? The sermon in Wesley’s corpus that speaks most directly to his value of unity and his desire to avoid division is “On Schism.” Wesley argues, based on his reading of the use of *schism* in 1 Corinthians, that schism does not refer to the division of a church into two new bodies, but divisions within a church that is still outwardly unified as one body.²¹ Wesley argued that the schism in Corinth “was not a separation from the church . . . but a separation in the church—a disunion in mind and judgment (perhaps also in affection) among those who, notwithstanding this, continued outwardly united as before.”²² Paul, on Wesley’s reading, then, is rebuking the Corinthian Christians for dividing into different parties or interest groups within one church. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 12:25, Wesley finds that schism refers to “an alienation of affection in any of them [the Corinthian Christians] toward their brethren, a division of heart, and parties springing

therefrom, though they were still outwardly united together, though they still continued members of the same external society.”²³

For Wesley, *schism* is a term that has been deeply misunderstood. It is division *within* a body and not division *of* a body. To drive the point home, Wesley concludes the first part of the sermon, “It is apparent to every impartial reader that it does not in any of these [uses of *schism* in 1 Corinthians] mean a separation from any church or body of Christians, whether with or without cause.”²⁴ After defining schism, Wesley shifts to addressing the concern at the heart of the misunderstanding of schism, “causeless separation from a body of living Christians.”²⁵ Wesley agrees that “schism, even in this sense, is both evil in itself, and productive of evil consequences.”²⁶ Wesley sees division within the body of Christ as “a grievous breach of the law of love.” Love, for Wesley, “unites us together, and the greater the love the stricter the union.”²⁷ This kind of separation violates scriptural commands for Christians to love one another. And the lack of love leads to “evil fruit” that is both inward (such as “severe and uncharitable judging of each other”) and outward (such as “bitter words, talebearing, backbiting, and evil-speaking”). The consequences of this kind of outward division are devastating. Wesley describes the “plentiful harvest of all the works of darkness . . . whereby in the end thousands of souls . . . may be turned from the way of peace, and finally drowned in everlasting perdition.”²⁸

Though Wesley acknowledges the devastating consequences of this kind of division among Christians, he does not go so far as to prioritize unity over and above the specificity of faithfulness and concrete expressions of practical holiness. In fact, he actually shifts to engaging reasons why someone would be justified in separating from a body of Christians.²⁹ Wesley is explicit that, if someone cannot continue in any gathering of Christians either “with a clear conscience” or “without sin,” then they “could not be blamed for separating from that society.”³⁰ Wesley amplifies the justifiable grounds for schism by offering a hypothetical that would have touched a nerve in his audience: “Suppose you could not remain in the Church of England without doing something which the Word of God positively commands; if this were the case (but blessed be God it is not) you ought to separate from the Church of England.”³¹ He raises the stakes further by applying this to himself directly:

I will make the case my own. I am now, and have been from my youth, a member and a minister of the Church of England. And I have no desire nor design to separate from it till my soul separates from my body. Yet if I was not permitted to remain therein without omitting what God requires me to do, it would then become meet, and right, and my bounden duty to separate from it without delay. To be more particular. I know God has committed to me a dispensation of the gospel. Yea, and my own salvation depends upon preaching it: “Woe is me, if I preach not the gospel.” If then I could not remain in the Church without omitting this, without desisting from preaching the gospel, I should be under a necessity of separating from it, or losing my own soul. In like manner, if I could not continue united to any smaller society, church, or body of Christians, without committing sin, without lying and hypocrisy, without preaching to others doctrines which I did not myself believe, I should be under an absolute necessity of separating from that society. And in all these cases the sin of separation, with all the evils consequent upon it, would not lie upon me, but upon those who constrained me to make that separation by requiring of me such terms of communion as I could not in conscience comply with.³²

It is notable in this passage how serious Wesley takes the obligations a preacher makes in committing to uphold the doctrine and discipline of the faith community to which they are related.

It is evident in the sermon that Wesley is strongly opposed to schism as division either of a body or within a body. If Wesley is correct that separation within a church is the scriptural understanding of schism, The United Methodist Church is already profoundly in schism. His sermon also pushes those who view the current church as either preventing them from doing what they know they should do or forcing them to do something they know they should not do to act based on those convictions and leave the church and join a faith community where they will be able to do no harm and do good. In such circumstances, Wesley lays blame for this division at the feet of those who are causing harm, or preventing faithfulness, not the person whose conscience requires them to leave.

Unity and Holiness

Missing from the discussion to this point is clarity about what Wesley thought about the church itself. In his sermon “Of the Church,” Wesley defined the *church* as, “The catholic or universal church is all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be ‘one body’, united by ‘one spirit’; having ‘one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all.’”³³ Similar to his approach elsewhere, Wesley seeks to broaden the category he is working with as much as possible. Citing Article 19, of the Church of England Articles of Religion, Wesley takes issue with the phrase, “in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered.”³⁴ He argues that the definition in the nineteenth Article would exclude too many people from the “church catholic.” Wesley wrote that he “dared not exclude from the church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines which cannot be affirmed to be ‘the pure Word of God’ are sometimes, yea, frequently preached. Neither all those congregations in which the sacraments are not ‘duly administered’.”³⁵

The final part of the sermon emphasizes the duty of Christians to “‘endeavour’, with all possible diligence, with all care and pains, with unwearied patience (and all will be little enough), ‘to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’”³⁶ In this part of the sermon, Wesley seems to make a significant change of course in a way that constricts his conception of who is in the church far more so than Article 19 of the Church of England would have. Reflecting on the description of the church in the Apostles’ Creed as “the holy catholic church,” Wesley writes:

“The church is called holy because Christ the head of it is holy.” Another eminent author affirms, “It is so called because all its ordinances are designed to promote holiness;” and yet another, “Because our Lord *intended* that all the members of the church should be holy.” Nay, the shortest and plainest reason that can be given, and the only true one, is: the church is called “holy” because it is holy; because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as he that called them is holy. How clear is this! If the church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it. If this whole body be animated by one spirit, and endued with one faith and one hope of their calling; then he who has not that spirit, and faith, and hope, is no member of this body. It follows that not only no common swearer, no Sabbath-breaker, no drunkard, no whoremonger, no thief, no liar, none that lives in any outward sin; but none that is under the power of anger or pride, no lover of the world—in a word, none that is dead to God—can be a member of his church.³⁷

This sermon, which was written towards the end of Wesley’s life, reveals the logical conclusion of Wesley’s theology and practice: there is no such thing as nominal Christianity. The end of the

previous passage shows that Wesley was not working with a vague or broad understanding of holiness that could function apart from specific actions. It is not only faith and hope that make someone a member of the church. Right action is also essential. And Wesley narrows this down to an uncomfortable degree of specificity. He does not only exclude people who commit the most exaggerated, unacceptable kinds of sin from being able to be considered members of the church. He includes a variety of more mundane actions, as well as inner dispositions or affections, in the criteria of what would keep someone from being a member of the church.

“Catholic Spirit” and “A Caution against Bigotry” spoke to how Methodists should treat Christians outside of Methodism. “On Schism” addressed one part of the body of Christ, and so argued more strongly for working hard to avoid the needless division that came from backbiting, jealousy, and a partisan spirit. But a common theme across all of these sermons is that the integrity of any faith community requires that it have clarity about what practical holiness looks like and that it act according to those principles. The sermon “Of the Church” amplified one of Wesley’s deepest convictions and core concerns for Methodism: the mission of Methodism is to raise up a holy people.

Holiness: The Mission of Methodism

The “Large” *Minutes* described, “God’s design in raising up the preachers called ‘Methodists’” as consisting of the mission “to reform the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”³⁸ When Wesley thought about Methodism and its mission and purpose, he was concerned with specificity around maintaining the doctrines and discipline of Methodism, for the sake of spreading scriptural holiness.³⁹ And as Wesley aged, he came to emphasize growth in holiness more, not less.⁴⁰ There is broad scholarly consensus based on Wesley’s frequent appeals to the essential role of holiness of heart and life for Methodists that he saw holiness as an essential for Methodists.

The central importance of holiness in Methodism is seen in the *Minutes* in several places. In the early 1770s, when the “rise of Methodism” was described, holiness featured prominently, even in the very beginnings of Methodism: “In 1737 they saw, holiness comes by faith. They saw likewise that men are justified before they are sanctified: but still holiness was their point. God then thrust them out, utterly against their will, to raise an holy people.”⁴¹ At conferences, Wesley and those who gathered with him were regularly examining the extent to which they were succeeding in their understanding of this mission to spread scriptural holiness. At the 1753 Conference, the question was asked, “Do we now all preach strongly and closely concerning both inward and outward holiness?” The answer was, “It would be well if we were more frequently and more largely to insist upon it in all its branches.”⁴² In the 1770s, the question was asked, “Why are not we more holy?” The diagnosis was a lack of discipline.⁴³ In order to preach in Methodist societies, one had to answer a series of questions that tested the prospect’s commitment to Methodist doctrine and discipline. Among other things, the questions required an explicit affirmation, of the importance of not only holiness but also Christian perfection. The questions asked: “Are you ‘going on to perfection’? Do you expect to be ‘perfected in love’ in this life? Are you groaning after it?”⁴⁴ In the 1780s, towards the end of Wesley’s life, the conferences were as tenacious in their emphasis on holiness as they ever had been. Discussing the work of a helper, the *Minutes* contained this exhortation:

Observe. It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society, but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possible

can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord. And remember! A Methodist preacher is to mind *every* point, great and small, in the Methodist Discipline! Therefore you will need all the sense you have—and to have all your wits about you!⁴⁵

The emphasis on holiness is evident in Wesley's occasional writings that discuss, define, and defend Methodism. In "The Character of a Methodist," Wesley defined a Methodist as "one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him'; one who 'loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.'"⁴⁶ A Methodist, Wesley further described as: "All that is in the soul is holiness to the Lord."⁴⁷

Wesley's understanding of holiness connected love of God to keeping God's commandments and avoiding sin. As a result, the sincerity of one's commitment could be measured. Wesley argued in "The Character of a Methodist," that "the tree is known by its fruits. For as he loves God, so 'he keeps his commandments.' Not only some, or most of them, but all, from the least to the greatest. . . . Whatever God has forbidden he avoids; whatever God has enjoined he doth—and that whether it be little or great, hard or easy, joyous or grievous to the flesh."⁴⁸ The connection between love of God and outward action is made explicit in the next paragraph:

All the commandments of God he accordingly keeps, and that with all his might. For his obedience is in proportion to his love, the source from whence it flows. And therefore, loving God with all his heart, he serves him with all his strength. He continually presents his soul and body a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God; entirely and without reserve devoting himself, all he has, and all he is, to his glory. All the talents he has received he constantly employs according to his Master's will; every power and faculty of his soul, every member of his body. Once he "yielded" them "unto sin" and the devil, "as instruments of unrighteousness"; but now, "being alive from the dead, he yields" them all "as instruments of righteousness unto God."⁴⁹

A few years later, in "Advice to the People Called Methodists," Wesley defined Methodists as "a people who profess to pursue (in whatsoever measure they have attained) holiness of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God."⁵⁰ In this essay, he sought to encourage Methodists to recognize "the peculiar circumstances wherein you stand."⁵¹ One of the primary reasons Methodists were peculiar was because they had new "principles." Wesley argued, "[T]here is no other set of people among us (and possibly not in the Christian world) who hold them all in the same degree and connexion; who so strenuously and continually insist on the absolute necessity of universal holiness both in heart and life."⁵²

Practical Holiness Was an Essential for John Wesley

Wesley consistently and repeatedly emphasized the central importance of holiness for the mission of Methodism. And he did not simply affirm the value of holiness; he structured the entire Methodist movement so that it would be as effective as possible in "spreading scriptural holiness." Indeed, the economy of Methodism was fundamentally designed to do two things: help people receive justification by faith, and then grow in holiness. This is seen in one of the most foundational documents for early Methodism, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies."⁵³ As has often been noted, the bar to become a Methodist was extremely low. The only "condition" to join a Methodist society was "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins." But the statement immediately followed this low bar up

with a much more difficult standard for staying a member of a Methodist society: “But wherever this is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits.”⁵⁴ The fruit of the desire of salvation was not only an initial experience of justification; it was a particular way of life.

And so, the remainder of the General Rules were a practical guide to holiness, describing three rules that framed Wesley’s understanding of what a person would do, concretely, if they were really earnest in their desire to “flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.” The first rule required Methodists to avoid “harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced.” A list of more than a dozen concrete acts that were most prohibited were then listed. The second rule required Methodists to do good “by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men.” The second rule then described the concrete ways Methodists were expected to do good to others, with particular emphasis on those who are poor, sick, in prison, and “them that are of the household of faith or groaning so to be.” Finally, the third rule required Methodists to “attend upon all the ordinances of God.” The shortest of the three rules, it listed the essential practices Christians should be committed to:

- The public worship of God.
- The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.
- The Supper of the Lord.
- Family and private prayer.
- Searching the Scriptures.
- Fasting or abstinence.⁵⁵

As the General Rules have returned to some prominence in contemporary Methodism, it is perhaps worth noting that Wesley seemed to anticipate that this way of life would not uniformly lead to adulation and accolades by those who were not Methodists, as the second rule exhorted Methodists to “deny themselves, and taking up their cross daily; submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should say all manner of evil of them falsely, for the Lord’s sake.”⁵⁶

Most relevant to our present purpose, the General Rules were requirements for every person who was connected to Wesley’s societies. They were not suggestions or recommendations. The document itself makes this explicit in its conclusion, which is quoted here in its entirety:

These are the General Rules of our societies; all of which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written Word, which is the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these we know his Spirit writes on truly awakened hearts. If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be known unto them who watch over that soul as they who must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But then, if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.⁵⁷

The General Rules were published in 1742, and they were never repudiated or replaced in Methodism during Wesley’s life. They persist in United Methodism as a part of our doctrinal standards, protected by the fifth Restrictive Rule in the Constitution of The UMC. The vision they offer for unity is that unity comes as a result of commitment to pursuing salvation through a common set of practices and a way of life. Indeed, the Methodist societies were literally constituted by those who held to this way of life. Those who were unwilling to do so had “no more place among us.”

The General Rules identified another key piece of Methodist discipline: the class meeting. Throughout Wesley's life and for more than half a century after the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) was formed in the newly constituted United States of America, the class meeting was also a basic requirement for membership in Methodism. Class meetings were groups of, ideally, seven to twelve people that met weekly and were led by a layperson. The General Rules described the basic function of the class meeting in its description of the work of a class leader: "receive what they [members of the class] are willing to give toward the relief of the poor"; "inquire how their souls prosper"; and "advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require."⁵⁸ These weekly meetings were *required* for membership in Methodism, both as a renewal movement within the Church of England throughout John Wesley's life and as a formal church in the MEC in the United States. The class meeting continued to be a requirement for membership in the MEC until the 1864 *Discipline*.⁵⁹

The band meeting was also an important aspect of Wesley's commitment to helping Methodist pursue holiness of heart and life. Band meetings typically had three to five people in a group and focused on confession of sin in order to grow in holiness. Citing James 5:16, the "Rules of the Band Societies" began: "The design of our meeting is to obey that command of God, 'Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed.'"⁶⁰ Even when the groups seemed to struggle to persist in Methodism, Wesley constantly urged Methodist preachers to reinstitute them and tend to them. In 1781, for example, Wesley wrote to Edward Jackson: "You cannot be too diligent in restoring the Bands. No Society will continue lively without them."⁶¹ Wesley saw the class meeting and the band meeting as so crucial to the mission of Methodism that he referred to them as the sinews of Methodism.⁶²

The General Rules and the class meeting both provided not only a detailed and practical approach to holy living but also the basic boundaries for who was and who was not a Methodist. And Wesley regularly removed people from membership for either repeated violations of the General Rules or for neglecting to attend their class meetings. In answer to a question about adding "proper solemnity" in admitting new members to the band meetings and societies themselves, the answer contained seven things that would do this. The last was, "then also let the names of those be read who are excluded from the Society."⁶³ Membership purges happened regularly in Methodism. In this case, Wesley intentionally recommended that it be done at the end of adding new members in order to remind them that their membership was contingent on holding fast to Methodist discipline. Removing people from membership was also frequent enough, and directly connected to specific actions that were understood to be sin that a few pages later the following question is asked:

Q. 7. May a relapser into gross sin, showing signs of repentance, be immediately readmitted into the Society?

*A. Not till after three months. But he may be admitted on those nights wherein strangers are admitted.*⁶⁴

When Wesley thought about the future of Methodism, toward the end of his life, he instinctively focused on adherence to the doctrine and discipline of Methodism as the key to ensuring unity. The *Minutes* explicitly asked in the early 1770s, "What can be done in order to preserve the future union of the Methodists?" The *Minutes* then record a letter Wesley read to the Conference, which wrestles with the "means" by which "this Connexion be preserved, when God removes me from you." He starts by saying that unity "cannot be preserved, by any means, between those who have not a single eye." Turning toward what can be done to preserve union among those who do choose to stay together, he proposes the following commitment:

We, whose names are underwritten, being thoroughly convinced of the necessity of a close union between those whom God is pleased to use as instruments in this glorious work, in order to preserve this union between ourselves, are resolved, God being our helper,

I. To devote ourselves entirely to God; denying ourselves, taking up our cross daily, steadily aiming at one thing, to save our own souls, and them that hear us.

II. To preach the old Methodist Doctrines, and no other, contained in the Minutes of the Conferences.

III. To observe and enforce the whole Methodist Discipline, laid down in the said Minutes.⁶⁵

When Wesley faced a time of uncertainty about whether Methodism would remain united, he focused on the preachers being entirely devoted to God, having clarity and single-minded commitment to Methodist doctrine, and having the same commitment to Methodist discipline.⁶⁶ He believed that unity would come by being clear about the particular beliefs and practices that constituted this particular people. Wesley saw these boundaries as life giving for a community of faith. If these basic commitments were not held to, Methodist unity would likely dissolve.

Conclusion

On the one hand, John Wesley worked to encourage a broad toleration and charity among Christians from a variety of sects. This is the burden of sermons like “A Caution against Bigotry” and “Catholic Spirit.” On the other hand, when talking about the mission or primary purpose of Methodism, Wesley consistently stressed that both inward and outward holiness were essential. It is a mistake to take Wesley’s broadest view of “catholicity,” which intentionally connotes the universal church, and apply it to a particular denomination. It is a disastrous mistake that undermines the very mission of Methodism when this is done in a way that suppresses a corporate pursuit of holiness. By its nature, holiness must be understood in its particulars, such as which acts constitute harm (the first General Rule), which acts constitute doing good (the second General Rule), and the individual and corporate practices where people seeking salvation can reliably expect to encounter the living God (the third General Rule).

All of the above come into play in the current disagreement within United Methodism about whether United Methodist pastors should officiate at same-gender marriages and whether United Methodist clergy themselves can be married to a person of the same gender. Based on recent General Conferences, the majority of United Methodists are unable to affirm same-gender marriage as an expression of holiness. A vocal and active minority sees gay marriage as an ecclesiastical right and understands performing these marriages and ordaining married gay clergy in violation of United Methodist *Discipline* as required acts of ecclesial obedience. The bishops’ statement at the 2016 General Conference appears to suggest that the way forward is a church that privileges unity over either of these particular views of marriage.

The reading of Wesley offered here cannot support an appeal to unity that lacks specificity and conviction regarding God’s intention for Christian marriage. As this paper has shown, Wesley does offer resources for how a faith community with a particular view of marriage could reach out in love toward one holding to a position with which it entirely disagrees. Wesley also offers resources on the importance of a coherent view of marriage for pastoral care and “watching over one another in love.” But Wesley does not offer resources for the attempt to constitute a church that would affirm contradictory views of gay marriage in one body because it would undermine the corporate pursuit of holiness. For Wesley, unity comes, not through

expanding the boundaries as far as necessary to keep everyone in, but through a common desire to grow in love for God and neighbor, which unavoidably entails a detailed account of the good life. For John Wesley, unity is a product of this common pursuit of holiness, not an end in itself.

“Holiness of Heart and Life”: Unity, Holiness, and the Mission of Methodism—Kevin M. Watson

¹ http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/general-conference/2016/documents/council-bishops-statement-offering-way-forward-may-18-gc2016.pdf.

² As an historian, it seems to me that the privileging of “new” as the way forward requires justification. Why would new be better? Is this self-evident? Is this most faithful to our own heritage and understanding of why unity is important and how it is to be secured?

³ The bishops seem to be correct in that assumption. There appear to be at least two groups within contemporary United Methodism with irreconcilable differences in how they understand God’s purpose for Christian marriage.

⁴ This essay, consequently, does not claim to be an exercise in constructive theology. Rather, it seeks clarity on John Wesley’s position on the relationship between unity and holiness. The essay does not claim to provide an exhaustive reading of all relevant texts. Indeed, it does not mention all passages in Wesley that speak to either unity or holiness. Wesley’s passionate and frequent discussions of holiness make this impossible, given the scope of this paper. The present paper seeks to engage the most relevant aspects of Wesley’s writing.

⁵ One particularly significant expression of Outler’s influence was the 1972 statement of “Our Theological Task.” The statement, with its endorsement of theological pluralism and the description of Scripture as one of four interdependent sources and guidelines for Christian theology (with tradition, reason, and experience) became controversial enough that it was almost entirely rewritten in 1988, this time under the leadership of, among others, Richard P. Heitzenrater. Outler’s introductions to Wesley’s *Sermons*, then, needs to be read with an awareness of Outler’s context and his own vision for United Methodism.

⁶ Albert C. Outler, “An Introductory Comment” to John Wesley, “A Caution against Bigotry,” in *Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vols. 1–4, *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984–85), 2:62. All citations are from this edition, unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Outler, “An Introductory Comment” to John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit” *Works*, 2:79.

⁸ Wesley, “Catholic Spirit,” *Works*, 2:82.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:87–89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2:90–92.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2:92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2: 93.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:94.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:82, emphasis added.

¹⁷ Wesley, “A Caution against Bigotry,” *Works*, 2:71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:70–71, emphasis added.

²⁰ Even here, Wesley is still working with an understanding that requires specificity. The three criteria for someone who “casts out devils” and should not be opposed still require clarity about what sin and holiness are. Here is the key passage in the sermon: “But what is a sufficient, reasonable proof that a man does (in the sense above) cast out devils? The answer is easy. Is there full proof, first, that a person before us was a gross, open sinner? Secondly, that he is not so now; that he has broke [*sic*] off his sins, and lives a Christian life? And thirdly, that his change was wrought by his hearing this man preach?” Wesley, “A Caution against Bigotry,” *Works*, 2:73.

²¹ Wesley particularly focuses on 1 Cor. 1:10; 11:18; 12:25. It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate whether Wesley’s exegesis of these passages is sound. The purpose is to understand Wesley’s own argument itself.

²² Wesley, “On Schism,” *Works*, 3:61.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3:63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:63–64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:64.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 3:65.
- ²⁹ It may be here that Wesley's voice is most overlooked in contemporary conversations related to a way forward for United Methodism.
- ³⁰ Wesley, "On Schism," *Works*, 3:66–67.
- ³¹ Ibid., 3:67.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Wesley, "Of the Church," *Works*, 3:50.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 3:52. Curiously, deleting this phrase was not one of the editorial moves Wesley made when he sent a revised form of the Church of England Articles of Religion to Methodists in America.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 3:55.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 3:55–56.
- ³⁸ Wesley, *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference, vol. 10, Works*, 10:845.
- ³⁹ In his "Introduction" to the critical edition of the *Minutes*, Henry D. Rack has described the purpose of the early Methodist Conference as functioning to preserve "something of that sense of a band of brothers, a committed order of preacher-ministers with a common purpose, which gave them sufficient unity to survive" (*Works*, 10:84).
- ⁴⁰ Rack summarizes Wesley's development as follows: "In Wesley's vision, as he grew older, the experience of justification by faith came to count for less in its own right than as the door to growth in holiness through sanctification, which he felt mattered most. And he saw sanctification increasingly as both a process to be cultivated by discipline (works of piety and works of mercy) in response to God's grace and a gift that could be received in a moment through God's grace by faith" (*Works*, 10:107).
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 10:875.
- ⁴² Ibid., 10:860.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 10:889.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 10:893.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 10:915.
- ⁴⁶ Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," *Works*, 9:35.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 9:38.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 9:39.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Wesley, "Advice to the People Called Methodists," *Works*, 9:123.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 9:125.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Wesley, "General Rules," *Works*, 9:69–73.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 9:70.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 9:70–73.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 9:72.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 9:73.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 9:70.
- ⁵⁹ Historians tend to see the removal of mandatory classes as more a recognition of what was already the reality than a removal of what, at that time, continued to be a functioning membership requirement. However, they did function as the basic membership requirement in the MEC for decades. For a detailed study of the class meeting in British Methodism during Wesley's life, see David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).
- ⁶⁰ Wesley, "Rules of the Band Societies," *Works*, 9:77. For a detailed study of the band meeting in British Methodism during Wesley's life, see Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ⁶¹ John Wesley, letter to Edward Jackson, January 6, 1781, in John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 7:47.
- ⁶² John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection As Believed and Taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, From the Year 1725, to the Year 1777," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Jackson edition, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 11:433.
- ⁶³ Wesley, *Works*, 10:821.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 10:830.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 10:904.

⁶⁶ Wesley makes a similar argument in other places, such as “Thoughts upon Methodism.”