

RECLAIMING HOLISTIC SALVATION

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As John Wesley contemplated the mediocrity of moral character and the ineffectiveness in social impact of Christians in eighteenth-century England, he became convinced that a central cause was the anemic understanding of salvation assumed so broadly in the church. In response, he focused his renewal efforts on reclaiming an understanding and embodiment of the *holistic salvation* that he found affirmed in Scripture and the broad Christian tradition. The characteristic doctrinal emphases and distinctive practices of early Methodism were central expressions of these focal efforts, and the resulting spiritual vitality of the movement is well-known.

This vitality is less evident today in the various Methodist communities descended from Wesley's ministry. Both insiders and observers are more likely to speak again of mediocrity and ineffectiveness. The only consolation offered is that few Christian traditions appear to be doing better. Rather than acquiescing in this comparative justification, Wesley's precedent would suggest that we, his present heirs, should probe our assumptions about salvation: Have we settled for the anemic understanding that he was contesting? Does this help explain why we fail so often to embody the fullness of salvation in our lives and in our outreach to others? The best way to answer such questions is to gain a better sense of the

emphases in Wesley's understanding of the salvation that God offers in and through Christ.

Not just forgiveness, but spiritual transformation

The first emphasis shines through in Wesley's most pointed definition of salvation: "By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health ... the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth" (*Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §3).

The "vulgar" notion that Wesley is rejecting here reduces salvation to God's forgiveness of our guilt as sinners, which frees us from future condemnation. While this may pick up the theme of Romans 1-3, it omits an equally biblical theme that can be represented by Romans 7-8, where the deepest impact of sin is our spiritual debilitation ("What I want to do, I cannot!") and God's gracious gift is the Spirit that enables our spiritual healing. Reflecting the "whole tenor of Scripture," Wesley encouraged his contemporaries to seek and to enjoy the benefits of *truly holistic salvation*, where God's forgiveness is woven into God's

broader gracious purpose of our present spiritual transformation.

Not just for individuals, for society as well

The second emphasis in Wesley's understanding of salvation is also hinted at in the definition above. When salvation is focused on forgiveness and "going to heaven," it takes on strong individualistic tones, since these are usually seen as discrete events for each person. By contrast, Wesley insisted that salvation was fundamentally social in nature. In the words of his well-known aphorism: "there is no holiness but social holiness."

Careful consideration reveals three dimensions in Wesley's emphasis on the social nature of salvation. The foundational dimension is his conviction that the support and accountability of a community of fellow pilgrims is crucial for growth in Christlikeness. The second dimension is his confidence that the growth nurtured in community will find expression in our lives, moving us not only to avoid doing harm but to offer aid to those in need. Wesley also recognized the importance of seeking to transform those political and economic structures that cause human suffering. This third dimension of social salvation is particularly evident in his later years, in tracts like *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of*

Provisions (1773) and *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774). Weaving these dimensions together, Wesley urged his followers to support one another in the pursuit of *truly holistic salvation*, seeking God's gracious transformation of our lives and of our various social structures.

Not just for souls, for bodies as well

The third emphasis in Wesley's understanding of salvation can be illustrated from his instructions to his assistants about their ministry among the Methodist people. He charged them to leave behind books that could provide ongoing guidance, highlighting in particular two works: 1) his excerpt of Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, which Wesley valued as a guide to spiritual health; and 2) *Primitive Physick*, a collection of medical advice which Wesley provided as a guide to physical health.

Most Methodists today are unaware of the second volume, and scholars who come across it often dismiss it as a collection of "home remedies." This seriously misjudges its nature and its centrality to Wesley's ministry. He read broadly on the topic of medicine throughout his life and gathered most of the remedies in *Primitive Physick* from prominent medical authors of his time. This was as much a use of his scholarly gifts to provide aids for his people as was his collection of theological writings in the *Christian Library*. Moreover, in the preface to this volume (and in other publications) Wesley added advice for promoting wellness to his suggestions for treating wounds and illnesses. He was not simply offering cures but promoting physical flourishing.

In other words, *Primitive Physick* is one expression of Wesley's deep conviction that God the Great Physician desires to heal soul and body together, to provide us all with both inward and outward health (cf. his letter to Alexander Knox, 26 Oct. 1778). While he allowed that it will be complete only in our resurrected state, Wesley resisted the tendency to minimize the physical dimension of this healing work in the present. He longed for Christians to see that participation in God's work of truly holistic salvation involves nurturing not only our souls but our bodies, and addressing both of these dimensions in our outreach to others.

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Not just for humans, for the whole of creation

The final emphasis in Wesley's mature understanding of salvation is surely the one least familiar to his present heirs. This emphasis also stood in starkest contrast to the understanding of salvation of most of his peers. Although Scripture speaks of our ultimate hope in terms of the new heavens and new earth, a variety of influences had led most Christians by Wesley's day to assume that our final state is "heaven above," where human spirits dwelling in ethereal bodies join with all other spiritual beings (no animals!) in continuous worship of the Ultimate Spiritual Being. Wesley imbibed this model in his upbringing, and through the middle of his ministry it was presented as obvious and unproblematic. But as he continued to probe the biblical witness to salvation he became convinced that God's salvific concern reaches beyond humanity to embrace the whole creation. This led him to issue late in his life provocative sermons defending the resurrection of animals ("The General Deliverance," 1781) and the inclusion of the very matter of our universe—properly transformed—in "The New Creation" (1785).

The most significant aspect of Wesley's reflection on this cosmic dimension of ultimate salvation is his sense of its relevance for present Christian life. He recognized that convictions about God's ultimate purpose should serve as guides for what we value now. Thus, he defended his speculation about God's future blessings of animals in "The General Deliverance" on the grounds that it might provide further encouragement for us to imitate now the God whose "mercy is over all his works." Lest this be left in generalities, he frequently exhorted against abusive treatment of animals. Avoiding such abuse ourselves, and helping prevent it by others, was one more way that Wesley believed we can participate in the *truly holistic salvation* that God offers in and through Christ.

Continuing relevance of Wesley's agenda

As one comes to appreciate the various emphases about holistic salvation that Wesley was concerned to reclaim in his day, it becomes clear that his agenda is far from completed. To consider just one example, popular expositions of genetic determinism, psychological determinism, and the like have convinced most persons today that we should not expect significant transformation of our character—the best we can do is accept the way we are. Among Christians this acquiescence has taken the form of reducing salvation implicitly or explicitly to "Christians are not different, just forgiven." (Lest one assume that this reduction happens only among "liberals," note how it is put in the mouth of the emblematic Christian wife raptured at the beginning of the first novel in the *Left Behind* series.) The challenge of reclaiming the biblical affirmation of present spiritual transformation is still very much before us!

Moreover, this challenge is as great within the Methodist fold as it is in our witness to others. While all four emphases on the nature of salvation were part of the heritage Wesley bequeathed to his followers, they were not equally received or retained. So he can serve as a mentor for us as we seek ourselves to understand and embody the holistic salvation affirmed in scripture and the broad Christian tradition. □



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