

*A Year with John Wesley and Our Methodist Values*, 39–40.  
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### **John Wesley on Holistic Mission**

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On several occasions John Wesley identified the distinctive concern of the early Methodist revival as reclaiming for the larger Christian family a focus on personal holiness, nurtured in community. This emphasis, explored in earlier entries, aligned Methodism with other “pietist” movements in Europe and North America. Critics of these movements sometimes charge that their focus on the inward life displaced concern for engaging the pressing needs in our world. Whatever the case in other settings, this charge cannot be pinned on Wesley and Methodism. Consider one of Wesley’s earliest responses to questions about the agenda of the revival:

This is the religion we long to see established in the world, a religion of love and joy and peace, having its seat in the heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth, not only in all innocence ... but likewise in every kind of beneficence, in spreading virtue and happiness all around it (*Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, §4).

The first thing to see in this quote is that inner renewal and engagement with the world are integrally connected. Deepened experience of the love of God renders one *more* likely to reach out in love to others, not less so. Conversely, as we minister to and with those in need around us, allowing the love of God to flow through us, it serves not only to meet their need but to deepen our renewal—a point Wesley makes by stressing works of mercy as a crucial “means of grace.”

Note as well in the quote the balance that Wesley highlights in authentic engagement with the world. There is not only the concern to avoid fault (which might lead one to separate from the world!), but also the desire to cultivate the well-being of others. This balance was so central that Wesley built it into the foundation of Methodist life—the *General Rules*. The first of the rules was “Do no harm”; the second, “Do as much good as you can for others.” The remaining rule about regular participation in the means of grace undergirded the first two by nurturing the heart from which these actions spring as fruit.

Review of the General Rules will reveal that they focus mainly on *personal* social justice (do no harm) and *service* to those in need (do good). There is little emphasis on “social witness,” or the attempt to influence broader society in changing structures that inflict harm. But this should not be seen as principled opposition to such a focus. It reflects instead the small size and limited influence of early Methodism. As the movement grew and Wesley recognized that they might have some political influence, he exhorted his Methodist followers to add their voices (and names on petitions) to agendas such as calling for abolition of the slave trade.

As Methodism continued to grow, gaining political prominence in some settings, the element of social witness became a central emphasis in mission to the world. Wesley would surely have welcomed this development—as long as it does not displace the other dimensions of mission embodied in the *General Rules*. Alongside our advocacy for change on the part of governments, corporations, and the like, those who stand in the Methodist tradition of holistic mission should never forget to focus as well upon our own actions, and upon faithful participation in the means of grace that nurture deep and abiding concern for others.