

John Wesley: Man of Devotion

“O BEGIN! Fix some part of every day for private exercises.... Whether you like it or no, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way: else you will be a trifler all your days.”¹ These words of John Wesley, written to one of his itinerant preachers, show the importance of the devotional life.

Even today many in the Wesleyan tradition are aware of his long-standing commitment to Christian devotion. We know of his practice of early rising and perhaps several of the devotional works he used. But often that is the extent of our knowledge. Consequently, Wesley's example is of little concrete help to us as we wrestle with our own spiritual formation.

This is unfortunate. Wesley's devotional life can be a rich source of help and inspiration to us as we search for our own particular patterns of devotion. This book is an attempt to bring to light some facets of Wesleyan devotion which can still serve to enrich our relationship with God. The particular focus of the book is on the means of grace, which formed the basis of Wesley's devotional practices. However, as we begin it is important to know why we are looking to John Wesley as a relevant guide for our devotional pilgrimage today.

We begin to get an insight by remembering his primary scripture verse: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all they mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love they neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:37-40).”² Wesley's devotional life was one means of fulfilling this goal. It became an avenue for him to more perfectly love God and others.

Certain key elements stand out in his devotional practices, which can help us as we seek to love God and others in the same way. *First, Wesley's devotional life has a realism about it.* When we study his devotional life, we sense we are following a fellow pilgrim in the faith. Wesley had ups and downs just like we do. His devotional life was not perfect just as ours is not. He made his share of mistakes as he went along.

One of the most graphic errors occurred around 1732. Wesley's devotions took a turn toward extreme self-examination. He became preoccupied with taking his spiritual pulse. At the back of his personal diary³ he devised a system by which he could evaluate his progress, or lack of it. This was done by measuring his spiritual life against a set of predetermined questions. For each time Wesley failed to live up to a particular question, he put a dot on a chart. At the end of the week he totaled up the dots for each question in order to see how many times he had failed in that area. As we can plainly see, his system caused him to emphasize his faults. Wesley was practicing defeatist devotionism!

This should be a warning to us. It is easy to slip into a devotional pattern which accentuates the negative. This is especially the case if we already have some problem with low self-esteem. We too easily practice the first half of James 5:16, “Confess your faults to one another,” but leave out the last half, “and pray for one another, *that you may be healed*” (RSV, italics added). As a result, our devotional life degenerates into spiritual neurosis.

Certainly we should not ignore the negative areas of our lives. We must continue to take failure and sin seriously. But Wesley's example does remind us that we find positive spiritual formation *not* by amplifying our problems but by applying God's grace. We can be thankful that Wesley corrected his mistakes and abandoned the keeping of his "failure chart." We must also find a devotional style that accentuates the healing, restoring grace of God.

Wesley's devotional life has a realism about it. He did not have it all neatly worked out so that his devotional life hummed along for sixty years like a finely tuned automobile. He had to make adjustments along the way. At times he had to abandon some practices. He reminds us that we have to do the same thing in order to have a meaningful walk with the Lord.

Second, Wesley's devotional life has a discipline about it. The fact that he made some mistakes did not prevent him from continuing. He knew he had discovered the essential element in the Christian life, and he was determined to see it through. Wesley's resulting witness is remarkable. His daily diary entries indicate that for more than sixty years he faithfully practiced spiritual disciplines. To be sure, he varied the format and content from time to time. He was willing to experiment now and then. But his basic intention to relate to God personally did not waver.

Again, it is necessary to balance this long pattern of faithfulness with a note of realism. Wesley knew dry times just like we do. In fact, he had a symbol in his diary to record the fervency of his prayers. Many days show that his prayers were "cold" or "indifferent." But he kept at it knowing there would again be times of warmth and rejoicing.

I've heard more than one person say, "Well, I'm not getting much out of my devotions right now, so I'm going to eliminate them for a while until the warmth returns." While I can certainly empathize with these people, I have come to see that this approach can be spiritually devastating. It is in the dry times that we need to remain disciplined and faithful. In fact, true prayer grows out of a sense of the absence of God and our need for God.⁴ If we give up in the times of dryness and weakness, we will miss the joy of meeting the God who comes to us in our need. And we will fail to gain insight into the cause of the dryness. This will cause us to make the same mistakes again and again.⁵

Wesley addresses this issue and reminds us that we cannot base our devotional life on our emotions. WE will center it in our will. It must flow out of our sense of need. We know what is right and we do it. We trust God to supply the appropriate emotions. Even in the absence of emotion we trust God to be at work in our lives. Discipline becomes the method by which our devotional life keeps going through fair weather and foul.

Third, Wesley's devotional life has a breadth about it. Beyond a doubt, he based his devotional life on the scriptures. He once remarked. "My ground is in the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible-bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small."⁶ He continually referred to himself as *homo unis libri* – a man of one book. But by these words Wesley only revealed the touchstone and standard of his faith. He did not limit himself to the Bible. His scriptural foundation gave him a place to stand in his quest for spiritual life, but he was free to search for meaningful inspiration through a wide range of devotional material. Wesley knew the classics. He drew on Anglican, Puritan, Moravian, and Roman Catholic sources.⁷ Consequently, his devotional life had a depth and variety which no single source could have provided. Using the

Bible as his focus, Wesley was able to achieve a useful synthesis of spiritual input from these sources.

Here is another important word for us. Too many in our time have limited themselves to a particular perspective in devotional content. More than that, some have settled for a devotional life that is based in what I call “pop-spirituality.” By that I mean it is trendy and grounded in the latest books from popular authors. There is a greater need to discover the wealth of devotional material that spans the centuries of Christian history.⁸ We stand on the shoulders of spiritual giants. Wesley challenges us to break out of a devotional narrowness and listen to the saints of the ages, all the while testing all things by the Bible.

Fourth, Wesley’s devotional life has a community nature about it. He never allowed his spirituality to deteriorate into private religion. Whenever he could, Wesley shared insights with others. His diary is filled with references to his reading devotional works to others and discussing the implications. Wesley’s letters are illustrative documents showing how he guided the spiritual progress of others.⁹ In these ways he was not only ministering to the needs of others but also receiving help and inspiration from them as well.

Wesley’s concern for corporate spirituality is most clearly seen in his formation of societies where people could find group support.¹⁰ These groups became the hub for Methodism’s life and growth. The late Bishop Gerald Enslley was correct when he observed that Wesley gathered believers through his preaching and nurtured them through the societies.¹¹

It was through the societies that Wesley demonstrated the social dimension of spiritual formation. It was inconceivable to him that true devotion could ever remain individualized or internal. Authentic spirituality always thrust one into a community and life of “social holiness.” Wesley’s prayers constantly reminded him that the world was his parish. His actions through the societies were the logical out-workings of genuine devotion and testimonies to the corporate nature of the devotional life.

Fifth, Wesley’s devotional life has a church dimension about it. It is important for us to remember that Wesley never allowed his personal spirituality or the societies to become “substitute churches.” He found his place in the regular worship of the Church of England, and he intended his followers to do the same. Wesley faithfully observed morning and evening prayers. He received the Lord’s Supper an average of once every four to five days, usually at an Anglican altar.¹² And he kept the festival and fast days of the Anglican Church.¹³

Wesley did not do these things because he believed the Anglican Church was a “pure church” or that its principles and practices were beyond question. He did not remain an Anglican because everyone believed like he did. No, Wesley did it all for one reason – he knew that to be a Christian is to be a functioning member of the body of Christ. No one can be a Christian in isolation. Wesley’s devotional life reminds us that there is no such thing as authentic spirituality apart from the church. God has called us to be in fellowship with the rest of the people of God. Our devotional life should motivate us toward that kind of body-life, not away from it.

In our day there is a renewed interest in spiritual formation and the devotional life. We are coming to see that we cannot meet the challenges of our age unless we are strengthened with inner resources. In the church we are coming to see that no amount of activity can substitute for a

personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The example of John Wesley as a man of devotion is relevant for us as we look for insight and motivation in the spiritual life. The needs are as great now as then. God is as near now as then!

1. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (1931; reprint, London: Epworth, 1960), 4:103.
2. All scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (1954; reprint, Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1966)
3. Wesley's personal diary should not be confused with his published journal; The journal appears in his standard works. The diary is yet to appear in its complete text. Richard Heitzenrater is currently transcribing Wesley's diaries for publication in the new edition of Wesley's works (*The Works of John Wesley*, New York: Oxford, 1975) currently going forward under the editorship of Dr. Frank Baker.
4. Theodore W. Jennings, *Life as Worship: Prayer and Praise in Jesus' Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 25-30.
5. A helpful booklet dealing with the problem of spiritual dryness is Walter Trobisch's *Spiritual Dryness* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1970).
6. Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley* (1909; reprint, London: Epworth, 1938), 5:169.
7. Perhaps the best-known favorites of Wesley were Thomas a Kempie's *The Imitation of Christ*, William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, and Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and holy Dying*. For an extensive list of Wesley's devotional reading consult my Ph. D. dissertation, "*The Devotional Life of John Wesley: 1703-38*" (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1981).
8. Several works are helpful in coming to know the classics of devotion. Doubleday has published three volumes entitled, *The Doubleday Devotional Classics* (E. Glenn Hinson, ed., 1978) Baker Book House has reprinted Thomas Kepler's *Anthology of Devotional Literature* (1977). The Upper Room has published a series of booklets entitled *Living Selections from the Great Devotional Classics*.
9. One of the finest examples of Wesley's use of letters to guide another's spiritual growth is the thirty-seven-letter set of correspondence between himself and "Miss March." (Telford, *Letters* 4:100, 109, 157, 180, & 310, and 5:82, 192, & 261-65 are some of the major letters.) In one of the letters (5:193) Wesley declares that he wants only to "say just what I hope may direct your goings in the way and prevent your being weary or faint in your mind."
10. This theme is developed further in chapter 6.
11. Francis Gerald Ensley, *John Wesley, Evangelist* (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, 1958), p. 47.
12. Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), p. 158.
13. Frank Baker's *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) is one of the best treatments of Wesley's relationship to the Anglican Church.