

I was told that Methodism was raised up by God to spread scriptural holiness. What is holiness?

You're thinking here of something John Wesley said. In 1763 at the Methodist Conference he answered the question "What may we reasonably believe to be God's purpose in raising up preachers called Methodist?" To this he gave the answer "to reform the nation and, in particular, the Church; to spread scriptural holiness over the land."

In last month's article we touched on Entire Sanctification or the Methodist conviction that all people can be "saved to the uttermost". Wesley did not teach that believers could reach perfection in any absolute sense that allowed no room for further progress or development. Rather he came to speak of "perfect love", a place where love towards God so fills your whole being that you find your highest delight in Him alone and your life is totally dedicated to pleasing and serving Him. In such a place sin completely loses its hold and sometimes even its appeal.

This is what is meant by holiness. It is not strict adherence to a set of dos and don'ts, avoiding all earthly pleasures and indulgences. So often our image of a holy person is one who lives a cloistered existence and denies themselves physical comforts and desires. We need to look to Jesus who, for years, worked for a living like the rest of us, mixed with all types of ordinary people and yet could say about God his Father "I only ever do what pleases Him." (John 8:29).

Wesley wanted all Methodists to seek after holiness. He would have liked what William Sangster wrote on the subject as he sat in the basement of Westminster Central Hall while bombs rained down on wartime London. *"There is an experience of God the Holy Spirit available for all who will seek it with importunity, which imparts spiritual power far above the level enjoyed by the average Christian: which inspires a caring God-like love different in kind and degree from the affections of normal nature: which communicates to the eager soul the penetrating power of holiness."*

John Wesley taught that at initial conversion a person was forgiven and brought into a saving relationship with God. The new Christian had a new heart that loved God and desired to please Him but "sinful tempers" remained and often led a person into failure and defeat. This further experience came as a gracious gift of God, entirely cleansing the heart from sin and "slaying the dire root and seed of it." In a letter to Sarah Rutter he wrote "Gradual sanctification may increase from the time you are justified, but full deliverance from sin, I believe, is always instantaneous – at least, I never knew an exception."

Three months before he died Wesley wrote to Adam Clarke "if we can prove that any of our preachers or leaders either directly or indirectly speak against (the teaching) let him be a local preacher or leader no longer. I doubt whether he shall remain in the Society." He put decline in any Methodist society down to a lack of preaching about holiness.

It is interesting that Wesley never claimed this experience for himself. He tested hundreds of Methodist people who believed they had known this blessing and

supported their claims. It's good to read about the lives of some early Methodist preachers like John Fletcher of Madeley whom Wesley described as **"the holiest man I ever met or ever expect to meet this side of eternity"**.

So where does all that leave us? It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that when it comes to spirituality and discipleship the early Methodists leave us standing. Most of us are content to rejoice in knowing our sins forgiven. We understand that Jesus died to make this possible but how many of us have ever considered that this is only half of the Good News? How many of us have given serious thought to the truth we sing that "He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free"? Through his death and resurrection Christ has triumphed over the powers of sin and death. When we are, by faith, united with him his victory becomes ours. He gives us the power not to sin.

Sadly nowadays we no longer take sin as seriously as did the early Methodists. We try to avoid what scripture expressly condemns but we have largely ceased to be concerned about wrong attitudes, careless words, missed opportunities to do good and above all failure to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. In short we have lost sight of what it really means to live holy lives.

William Sangster, in wartime London made three observations about the church of his day. He said that many Christians lived on a sub Christian level; lacked any sense of goal and had no clear understanding or experience of the Holy Spirit. That analysis is probably still true of us today. We need to recover a sense of purpose and of power. We need to recapture a desire for holiness and we need to open ourselves afresh to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Such holiness begins in the individual. Sangster writes **"Holiness is potent and mighty....It rebukes sin. It creates the appetite for itself. It blasts doubt and fosters faith. No man is quite the same after contact with a saint. He may fly from him, and even, in the obduracy of his sinning, hug his sin the tighter, but always, uneasily, he remembers."** Holiness however does not stop there. It goes on to transform the Church and ultimately affects society. That is why Wesley said that there was no holiness but social holiness and why Methodism has always sought to put evangelism hand in hand with social action.

And that, he said was why Methodism was raised up. Makes you think, doesn't it!

