



# Holiness, grace and mission: revisiting John Wesley's missiological mandate

Valentin Dedji

THE REVD DR VALENTIN DEDJI is a Methodist minister, currently in charge of Edmonton Methodist Church in North London. He is a Visiting Lecturer in Missiology at the University of Yaounde, Cameroon, and at the Protestant University of Porto-Novo, Benin.

Shalom2040@hotmail.co.uk  
London, UK

*The essence of this article is a fresh exploration of John Wesley's missiological mandate. The objective is to reflect on how to engage in mission in a European context, particularly Great Britain today, from John Wesley's perspective: revisiting the context of Wesley's mission and ministry; exploring some key concepts in John Wesley's making of Methodist theology; and revisiting Wesley's missiological mandate in our contemporary context of mission and ministry. In conclusion, I will contribute to the debate with some practical proposals: rescuing the language of mission, reaffirming the doctrine of the organic unity of the Body of Christ, reinventing ecclesial practices of grace and gratitude, and repositioning Methodist heritage in a bigger perspective.*

MISSIOLOGICAL MANDATE • PREVENIENT GRACE • PERFECTION • SOCIAL HOLINESS • ARMINIANISM • JOHN WESLEY • GRACE • GRATITUDE • REVIVAL • HUMAN DIGNITY

## Introduction

I am a British Methodist minister originally from Benin, West Africa. Here I must confess that deep within me there is a creative tension between what it means to remain truly African as well as being a Christian with British nationality. Being Methodist does not solve but epitomises this dilemma.

It is from that background that I reflect on the challenge of engaging in mission in the European context, more specifically in the UK today. This explains my fascination for rule number 11 as formulated by John Wesley and the early Methodist preachers in their *Helper's Manual*: 'You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those who want you but to those who want you most.'<sup>1</sup> This is a missiological mandate of almost alarming simplicity. However, I agree with William Abraham that we should not 'read this mandate through the lens of the popular evangelicalism that prevails today in our culture.'<sup>2</sup> For, Wesley's evangelical theology was quite different from many forms of twenty-first-century Evangelicalism. In John Wesley's view, what is at stake here is the making of robust disciples who will become salt and light in the world.<sup>3</sup> More precisely, in Wesley's jargon, it is a thorough 'Christian initiation' which encompasses justification and sanctification as the primal goal of salvation. All this is woven into a system of key concepts that include mainly: conviction of sins, repentance, good works, regeneration, adoption, access to the kingdom, assurance, the witness of the Spirit, holiness, perfection in love. This systematic configuration was underpinned by a prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace. The presence of this grace was entirely compatible with urgent action in and out of season on the part of those called and equipped by God to preach the gospel and ground people in the faith. So the mandate to save souls is not an authorisation for mere statistics or filling membership returns forms. Nor is it a recipe for cheap conversion.

In the past, some official publications have endeavoured to emphasise the evangelistic roots and the self-identity of Methodism. Such was the case of *Message and Mission of Methodism* (1946), which aimed at revitalising the evangelistic outreach of the Church. In his book *The Social Witness of Methodism* (1948), Maldwyn Edwards highlighted social action by Methodists, modelled by John Wesley as an option for a great social reformation. Tim Macquiban rightly comments that Wesley's witness among the poor, his opposition to the slave trade, as well as providing health and educational services for the masses, 'resonated with the call for Methodist involvement in the affairs of the welfare state.'<sup>4</sup>

The key factor that revived my interest in John Wesley's evangelistic actions and his views on 'holiness, grace and mission' was one of the decisions adopted at the recent Methodist Conference in Birmingham in June 2014 to go back to 'mission and evangelism' as some of the top priorities of the Methodist Church in Great Britain today.

Methodologically, by starting with a fresh assessment of the context in which John Wesley engaged in his ministry and mission work will help us, as William Abraham put it, to avoid the temptation of putting Wesley's missiological mandate 'in the theological microwave and serve it immediately for our own day.'<sup>5</sup> My session on Wesley's contribution to the making of Methodist theology can only be a bird's-eye view. It would be impossible to capture in a short article like this the exhaustive list of all the multiple and complex theological themes developed by Wesley. My analysis of our contemporary context would be vital for the formulation of the practical options that will appear in my concluding section. My argument would be that what is at stake is a challenge to Methodism to move its stories into a bigger perspective. There is an ambivalence between a 'theology of mission' and a 'missionary theology', which remains even though it is true that Methodism started as 'a missionary movement' and that Methodist heritage and contemporary mission is still a crucial topic.

## **Wesley's mission and ministry in context**

One of John Wesley's merits is how he achieved his work against the backcloth of the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century in Britain.<sup>6</sup> In his early days Wesley was influenced by the philosopher John Locke, though he was not one of his wholehearted disciples. Against the official option of the University of Oxford for Aristotle's philosophy, privately people began to read and use John Locke.<sup>7</sup> This is where Wesley had the merit to rise above the standard empiricism of his days represented by John Locke. By doing so, he managed to offer a form of philosophical rationale that was appealing to religious experience as the foundation of Christian faith and theology. Such a philosophic-religious atmosphere influenced Wesley's elaboration of 'Christian perfection' as 'the most distinctive feature of Methodist theology'.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, one has to observe that the general political and religious configuration, within which Wesley lived, was one that was shaped by a confessional state and a confessional church. Clearly, religion played a vital role in everyday life

in England in the eighteenth century. Thus religion shaped the political thinking of the period. More specifically, the Church of England was deeply influential, exercising enormous power by insisting on confessional tests for political office and supporting the monarchy in its claim to rule by divine right. Viewed from this universe, William Abraham describes Wesley as a good, solid conservative figure 'committed to the carefully constructed alliance of parliament, church, and monarchy'.<sup>9</sup>

However, if we rely on Wesley's own narrative, he portrays himself as a man on a mission and, like most people on a mission, he makes his case by painting the religious context of his time in pretty gloomy terms. Besides, Wesley's standards as to what constitute real Christianity are so high that not even his beloved Methodists could escape the hammer of his wrath. But, what we now know is that Wesley lived in a society and in a world that was more Christian than he allowed.

This complex background situation explains why Wesley could devote his zeal and passion to the saving of souls. As such, the whole life of John Wesley was built around the understanding and promoting of the Christian life. His officially published sermons are remarkable if read from this angle. Here, we may observe that in compiling his standard collection of sermons he claims that he set himself to be 'comparatively' a 'man of one book' – the Bible – as the guide to salvation. Yet the Bible has always to be interpreted, and Wesley never entirely abandoned the use of tradition, especially for apologetics purposes; and he was a thoroughly eighteenth-century man in his desire to appeal to 'reason' and, increasingly, to experience: his own but even more that he observed in others. In this regard, Wesley was really successful in his endeavour at serious experiments in catechesis and group spiritual direction that would be effective in making robust disciples of Jesus Christ in his day. We will elaborate on this point in our next section regarding the process through which John Wesley and his followers contributed to the making of Methodist theology.

## **John Wesley and the making of Methodist theology**

It is quite interesting to follow the process through which John Wesley influenced the making of Methodist theology. There is no doubt that Wesley was a voracious reader. As such one can understand why some of his polemical pieces of writing were influenced by a variety of sources such as the Church

Fathers, the sixteenth-century Reformers and the Revival movement.<sup>10</sup> One of the major merits of John Wesley's evangelistic zeal was that he practised what he preached. He tirelessly endeavoured at saving souls. For instance, in response to his assistant Whitfield's plea, Wesley made himself more 'vile' by preaching to thousands of the working poor in the open spaces around Bristol (1738–1739). Undeniably, the Wesleyan Revival materialised through the unprecedented response from the miners to Wesley's preaching of grace, in a context where the first stages of a brutal labour-intensive economy were unfolding. Though at its inception the Revival was primarily led by lay people – mostly uneducated, unordained preachers, class leaders, stewards and trustees – Wesley became later the theologian, teacher and organiser of the said movement. More specifically, Wesley saw in the Revival God raising up the Methodists 'to reform the nation, especially the church, and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.'<sup>11</sup> Wesley's theology developed on the ground, as it were, out of the exigencies and new experiences of the Revival. As rightly put by David Hempton, 'the hallmarks of Wesley's theology emerged in constant tension with the Moravian emphasis on faith alone and the Calvinist emphasis on election leading to the doctrine of predestination.'<sup>12</sup> Hempton goes on to comment that the simple assumption that faith was the only prerequisite for salvation led, in Wesley's view, to Quietism. And predestination cut off the lifeblood of Christian discipleship.

In terms of methodology, Wesley resembled Luther rather than Calvin, for like Luther his main concern was with the way of salvation, though if Luther focused on the way of justification, Wesley may be said to have focused on the way of sanctification. Both men took many traditional doctrines for granted and did not make any fresh significant contributions to them: for example on the Trinity, the Person of Christ, the atonement, heaven and hell. Given the limitations of the Oxford disciplines, John Wesley turned to the Moravian way of justification by grace through faith and the means by which his holiness project could be undertaken and achieved.

Wesley's portrayal of himself as an 'evangelical' Protestant may seem confusing, and his close link with a number of Catholic sources as well as the very language of perfection have suggested an affinity with the Catholic tradition. Additionally, he always maintained that his theology was in harmony with the doctrinal standards of the Church of England and only a hair's breadth different from the Calvinist. Therefore, it may be argued that 'the Catholic tradition provided the goal while the Protestant emphasis provided the dynamic'. However, it is important to recognise that Wesley never borrowed anything

without setting his own interpretation upon it, and that in its mature form his version of perfection was certainly not one that can be ascribed to a Catholic writer. However, his ideas and language do bear a more obvious affinity to the tradition of Catholic than to Protestant spirituality.

Having said this, let's point out that Wesley identified three doctrines in *A Short History of Methodism* (1765) that summed up the core of Methodist and Wesleyan-Holiness teaching. What he says there essentially reflects his thought contained in two key short documents, *Character of a Methodist* and *The Principles of a Methodist*, both published in 1742.

First, the doctrine of prevenient grace ('grace that goes before'), which Wesley gleaned from the Church Fathers, points to a God who saves the lost without transgressing their moral freedom to choose. Such grace enables the individual to repent of their sins and to believe in Jesus Christ.

Second, Wesley taught that salvation, or justification as it is termed, comes by faith alone. He dismissed the notion that righteous works, even though good in themselves, accrue any merit whatsoever towards salvation. Wesleyans teach that the moment one believes, he or she is saved; and by believing they may expect to receive an inward witness of having been delivered from bondage to sin and eternal damnation to freedom from sin and eternal life. The fullness of salvation can take place only in the beloved community of disciples; the only true holiness is 'social holiness'.

Third, Wesley elaborated his own version of the doctrine of Arminianism which was originally initiated by the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius. This doctrine presupposes God's universal and unlimited love for all through the atonement provided by Jesus' death. One of the key arguments of Arminianism is that God's grace can be resisted, making it possible for believers to fall from grace. Wesley's version of Arminianism reconceived the concept of atonement to incorporate an understanding of justice, implying that although Christians could lose their salvation, acts of apostasy were not final.<sup>13</sup>

Fourth, Wesley advocated that genuine faith produces inward and outward holiness. His approach to the doctrine of holiness takes its roots in the command to be holy as God is holy (Lev 19:2 and parallel Old Testament passages). Similarly, Jesus commanded, 'Be perfect therefore as your Father in heaven is perfect' (Mt 5:48). Also, through 'the Great Commandment' Jesus taught that true Christian discipleship requires loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving neighbour as self (Mt 22:37–40). Wesley

understood perfection in the theological sense as having to do with maturity of character and ever-increasing love for God. Therefore, whenever Wesley discussed holiness, sanctification or perfection (all theologically synonymous), he preferred the expression 'Christian perfection'. By appending the adjective Christian, he sought to avoid comparisons with the Reformers whose idealistic notions of perfection led them to believe that holiness or personal sanctity is not possible in this life. Christian perfection, for Wesley, is achievable in this present life because it has to do with the affections. When, by the grace of God infused into the soul through the Holy Spirit, one's love for God and others is made pure and complete their lifestyle cannot help but increase in virtue, finding expression in loving, selfless actions. Faith working outwardly through love was one of Wesley's favourite biblical themes (Gal 5:6).

One of the most distinctive and contentious debates within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition is whether Christian perfection or, as it is often termed, 'entire sanctification', is an instantaneous second work of grace or the gradual working of the Spirit. Is it crisis or process? In fact, Wesley said it is both. Wesley consistently argued that salvation must produce holiness of heart and life, but he never viewed the process as a ladder of ascent of sorts, as ancient and medieval Christian mystics had. He never envisioned a stage in this life where one has arrived and can go no further. Instead, Wesley viewed Christian holiness biblically as a linear movement forward. He taught that despite the inner assurance and regeneration of character that results from justification, it is never too long before the new believer discovers that there is still a root of sin within. Unlike the Reformers, who had taught that sanctification only occurs at death, Wesley argued that he could see no reason why it could not occur many years before death. Certainly, he said, there is no biblical evidence that would lead one to think otherwise. Though he never claimed himself to be entirely sanctified (he believed that claiming it was a fair sign that one was not so), Wesley recorded the experiences of others whom he had no doubt were delivered from all sin and filled entirely with the pure love of God.

## **Wesley's missiological mandate in our contemporary context**

It is clear that the intellectual, political and ecclesiastical world in which John Wesley lived is completely different from our context in the West, Great Britain in particular, today.

Though there are still some residues of Christianity in our contemporary context, it is obvious that our culture today is mostly post-Christian and is generally terrified of all forms of religious specificity and orthodoxy. Abraham's reflections on this matter are insightful here.<sup>14</sup> Pluralism, tolerance and scepticism about the place of religion in the public order are endemic. The very idea of an aggressive form of Christianity committed in a serious way to the conversion of people is greeted with alarm, suspicion and fear. Robust forms of Christian orthodoxy, no matter how generous in tone or content, will immediately be dismissed as fundamentalism within the Church and as a revival of theocracy within the culture.

Secondly, the practices of band, class and society and the regulations governing them are gone for ever, even in the most loyalist and conservative Wesleyan circles. Most forms of robust 'Wesleyanism' are really a reworking of the moralism, legalism and revivalism of the nineteenth century. These have rendered an invaluable service in keeping alive neglected features of the Wesleyan heritage, but none seriously pretend that they are a straight recapitulation of Wesleyan catechetical practice. Moreover, self-confessing conservative Wesleyans are currently under great pressure to conform to the theological convictions and practices of generic Evangelicalism. Methodism as it existed in the early period is no longer with us in the West.

Thirdly, Christians have lost the intellectual debate in high culture. The scandal of the Church is that the Christ-event is no longer life-changing; it has become life-enhancing. We have lost the power and joy that makes real disciples; we have become consumers of religion and not disciples of Jesus Christ. Could it be that today the Western Church has a Bible but has lost her Holy Scripture, resulting in biblical illiteracy within the community of faith? In these circumstances it is no surprise that many have turned to postmodernism for relief. Nobody can really secure positive rationality, justification or knowledge, so we should settle for the possibility of mere true belief. Consequently, postmodernity becomes the ticket to academic respectability and a seat at the cultural table.

Here, I humbly attempt to make a few practical proposals.

### *Rescuing the language of mission*

Christian faith is always at the crossroads between hope and despair, between the Cross and Resurrection. However, what we must not permit the current crisis in evangelistic zeal and in missionary identity in the West to do is to curtail



our missionary vision in such a way that it becomes nothing more than an exercise in ecclesiastical self-preservation: 'we'll leave the fate of the rest of the world to the rest of the Church; we in Britain are going to ignore global responsibilities and put all our energies into reversing our declining membership rolls'. Such a commitment to self-preservation is the very antithesis of mission, and is surely the recipe for further decline. Missiology still remains fundamentally divided between those who are passionate about evangelism and those who are passionate about justice, and there will be no real recovery of mission in British Churches until we are equally passionate about both.

### *Reaffirming the doctrine of the organic unity of the Church*

The theological point at stake here is the reaffirmation of the doctrine of the organic unity of the Body of Christ. There is one Body of Christ, and one mission to which it is called. That mission will be weakened and impoverished if one part of the body turns its back on the world beyond its own shores. More gravely, the implications would be that the Church is committed to mission or it is committed to extinction. There is a compelling point to be clarified here: mission is a participation in the life of the Trinity. As such, mission is not an external activity imposed by church leaders on top of all the other demands on church members. Mission is a heartfelt but spontaneous outworking of the inspiring, transforming, life-giving work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

### *Reinventing ecclesial practices of grace and gratitude*

Let's face it: our contemporary context is one of a dehumanising market, political schemes with no credibility, a judicial system that favours the powerful, a loss of values breaking up our families together with communities and societies. In such a context, the calling of churches should tend towards becoming more communities of belonging/inclusion, of celebration and rejoicing, joy and hope, rather than communities of law or exclusion. Consequently, ecclesial structures and church polity actually hinder mission and therefore develop into monuments and not mission movements. This may explain why there is a blatant lack of emphasis on *grace* and *gratitude* (*charis/eucharistia*) in our ecclesial practices. In a paper presented at a mission forum in 2001, George Kovoov (then Principal of Crowther Hall and CMS Mission Education Director) argued that 'the language of the Western Church is cerebral ... and preoccupied with political correctness'.<sup>16</sup> Following St Augustine and the sixteenth-century Reformers, the German theologian Karl Barth emphasised the importance of the relationship between grace and gratitude

by insisting that grace should be the central principle of our theology of mission and gratitude the driving force of our ethics. It is important to link grace and human dignity; both refer to God, and both refer to human beings. Human dignity and divine grace are inseparable because it is not possible to experience grace without human dignity. Where there is no human dignity, there is an absence of God's grace; where there is human dignity, in some way God's grace and God's glory are present. Churches that fulfil God's mission should enable the manifestation of God's grace and gratitude, together with his glory.

### *Repositioning Methodist heritages in a bigger perspective*

For this to be credibly implemented, we will have to look again at the whole history of Methodism after Wesley, paying particular attention to the shift from a movement to that of a network of Wesley denominations. In particular we need to come to terms with what we may now call the canonical history of Methodism. In this we must pay careful attention to the official, canonical decisions made, identifying the specific canonical heritages created, and the canonical mechanisms invented for adjusting them over time. It helps enormously to set this in good Wesleyan fashion against the backcloth of the canonical heritage of the Church of the first millennium. One of the central points here would be the renewal of robust baptismal and eucharistic practice. Equally important is a full updating of what we may have learnt about the manifold working of the Holy Spirit from Wesley's grandchildren, the Pentecostals.

### *Conclusion*

The general conclusion to be drawn at this juncture is clear. Wesley's commitment to saving souls was lodged in a cultural, ecclesial and intellectual context that has collapsed over time. It was at home in a network of spiritual and evangelistic practices that have been eroded. Personally, I have a boundless admiration for John Wesley's labour, his ingenuity and successes. However, any attempts to reinstate Wesley's project of saving souls without attending to the intervening developments is simply a non-starter. We can and we must come to terms with the wider challenges that knowledge of Wesley's background brings to light. Hence, we cannot come to terms with the saving of souls in a way that will begin to do justice to Wesley if we do not face the tough choices that confront us in the doctrinal and intellectual renewal of the Christian faith as a whole. If we were to opt for keeping Wesley's commitment

to the saving of souls, we would need to retrieve the patristic core of the doctrinal and intellectual DNA deployed by Wesley, and we would take seriously the task of epistemology and apologetics, all the while reinventing, as we proceed, the ecclesial practices and disciplines that will both feed into and be fed by those doctrinal and intellectual resources. That is my preferred option, which William Abraham has called the 'renewalist alternative'.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

1. This rule was added at the Conference of 1745. The other rules, 12 in all, were developed at the Conference of 1744. They can be found in Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George and Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Britain* (London: Epworth Press, 1988), vol. 4, pp. 116–119.
2. See Abraham 2003, p. 1.
3. Abraham 2003, p. 3.
4. Macquiban 2004, p. 18.
5. Abraham 2003, p. 4.
6. The title *Reasonable Enthusiast* that Henry Rack gave to his book on *John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* is a clear indication of this success.
7. For more details, read Rack 1992, pp. 158ff.
8. Macquiban 2004, p. 20.
9. Abraham 2003, p. 6.
10. For a detailed account of such influences, see Rack 1992, pp. 166–169.
11. Quoted by Hempton 2010, p. 794.
12. Hempton 2010, p. 794.
13. For more details, see Jeffrey 2010, p. 74.
14. Abraham 2003, pp. 8–9.
15. See Kim 2009, p. 30.
16. Kovoov 2001.
17. Abraham 2003, p. 13.

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