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What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us? Scriptural Christianity: the mind of Christ

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Wesley's sermon on 'Scriptural Christianity' was preached before the University of Oxford in 1744, and received a hostile reception. Scriptural Christianity (or scriptural holiness) means having 'the mind of Christ'. Wesley outlines the change effected in the individual by the gospel, the necessity for mission, and the future establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. In a final section he attacks his hearers – both College Fellows and undergraduates – for their failure to live holy lives. The sermon is valuable today for its affirmation of the biblical holiness which is centred, not on the righteousness of the individual, but on love for God and for one's neighbour.

SCRIPTURAL HOLINESS • THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT • THE MIND OF CHRIST • SOCIAL CHRISTIANITY • THE HOLY CLUB • MISSION • FELLOWSHIP • SOCIAL JUSTICE • THE KINGDOM OF GOD • PHARISEES

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John Wesley preached his sermon on 'Scriptural Christianity' before the University of Oxford at St Mary's Church on 24 August 1744. Today it seems strange that such an event should take place in August, for occasions such as this are now confined to University terms, but in those days, sermons before the University apparently continued throughout the year. In that year, 24 August fell on a Friday, and was St Bartholomew's Day. Wesley himself remarked that it was appropriate that the event had occurred on that day, since on St Bartholomew's Day 1662, 'near two thousand burning and shining lights were put out at one stroke'.[1] He is referring to the expulsion of two thousand clergymen – including Wesley's own grandfather, John Wesley – from their livings for refusing to take the oath required by the Act of Uniformity. Wesley clearly saw a parallel between what happened to his predecessors and the reaction to his own sermon, commenting however that whereas they had lost everything, he was simply 'hindered from preaching' – a mere inconvenience.

Among those present in St Mary's on this occasion were the Vice-Chancellor, the heads of houses, professors, fellows of the colleges, and undergraduates. The church was packed – the numbers attending increased, so Charles Wesley tells us, by the fact that it was race week! Charles commented that he had never seen a more attentive congregation.[2] After the sermon, the Vice-Chancellor sent for John's notes, which suggested interest, but subsequent events showed that this was not accompanied by approval of what had been said.

The theme of 'Scriptural Christianity' was dear to Wesley's heart. For him, 'scriptural Christianity' was 'authentic Christianity'. Methodism, as he explained elsewhere, had been raised 'to spread scriptural *holiness* over the land'.[3] It was a definition that was to make its way into the Deed of Union. 'Scriptural holiness' is fundamental to what it means to be a Methodist – and 'scriptural Christianity' is, in effect, the same thing.

As this sermon demonstrates, Wesley's approach to preaching is certainly scriptural, since he makes constant appeal to Scripture, not using it in a fundamentalist or literalist fashion, but anchoring his argument there. He begins from a text – 'And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost' (Acts 4:31) – and remarks first on the parallel with the account of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–6), but points out that in Acts 4 there is no reference to outward manifestations of the Spirit such as are found in chapter 2; nor is there any reference to 'extraordinary gifts', such as those mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 (*Intro. 1–2*).[4] These gifts are rare, he argues, and are not given to all Christians (*Intro. 3*). What *were* given were the 'ordinary' fruits of the Spirit, such as those listed in Galatians 5: love,

joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness. The effect of these gifts was to give those who received them 'the mind which was in Christ' (*Intro. 4–5*). Here Wesley sums up his understanding of 'scriptural Christianity': it is quite simply to have 'the mind of Christ'. Christianity, he insists, is not a 'set of opinions' or a 'system of doctrines', but something that is seen in believers' 'hearts and minds'.

Wesley sets out to consider this 'scriptural Christianity' under three headings. In Part 1, he considers it 'as beginning to exist in individuals'. Today, New Testament scholars may well wonder whether he was right to begin here! Jesus' mission was to his nation, Israel. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, understood his mission to be to bring all nations to God, incorporating them into God's holy people. For both, the focus was on the community, rather than on individuals. In practical terms, however, appeals must be made to individuals, and it is individuals who either respond or fail to do so. Although Jesus believed himself to be sent to Israel, it was individuals whom he summoned to follow him, and the core of the new community which was born at Pentecost consisted of his first disciples – both men and women: Christianity was social from the very beginning. The apostle Paul thinks in global terms, insisting that Christ's death and resurrection affect all humankind, but his arguments are persuasive precisely because they are personal, as in Galatians 2:20, which Wesley quotes here: 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave up himself for me' (*I.1*). In later centuries, with Israel's failure (as Christians saw it) to respond, and with the spread of Christianity, the focus inevitably shifted more and more to the individual, with the result that later spirituality focused on one's own salvation.

This, of course, was precisely the mistake that the Wesley brothers had made in their early lives when, as members of the 'Holy Club', they had devoted themselves to personal piety, in hope of finding personal salvation. Now their passion was to save others. Yet in view of his own experience of the warmed heart, it is hardly surprising that Wesley should begin in this sermon with the individual's experience of the Spirit, and the love of God 'shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost' (Romans 5:5) (*I.1–4*). This, however, leads immediately to the conclusion that those who experience the love of God must not only love God in return, but love their brothers and sisters also: since God's Son died for all (as Charles emphasises so often in his hymns), we must love all (*I.5*). Religion may *begin* in an individual experience, but must not remain there: as Wesley puts it elsewhere, there is no such thing as solitary religion. Wesley then spells out what is involved in love for others: they must not be puffed up; they

must do no harm to others, must join in common worship, and do good to others – feeding the poor and clothing the naked; they must share their possessions (*I.6–9*). Once again, we are reminded of the 'Holy Club', but now these activities are grounded solely in love for God and for others. In those early days of the Church, concludes Wesley, 'the love of Him in whom they had believed constrain[ed] them to love one another' (*I.10*). He is well aware that Christianity is a social religion. His decision to begin with the experience of individuals is in no sense inconsistent, therefore, with his conviction that the world was his parish.

And it is the theme of 'mission' to which Wesley turns in Part 2 of the sermon. The first disciples were called to give light to the world and to act as salt (*II.1*). As 'lovers of mankind', they felt bound to preach the gospel to all, and restore the sheep that had gone astray to their shepherd (*II.2*). Here, as elsewhere, Wesley's language is full of biblical allusions. But the substance, too, is biblical: these early Christians warned others of divine wrath (*II.3*), and promised them forgiveness, while believers were urged to pursue holiness (*II.4*). The result was that God was glorified, while outsiders were offended (*II.5*); inevitably, this led to persecution (*II.6–9*).

In Part 3, Wesley turns to the ultimate goal – a Christian world. He affirms that God will finally reign and the kingdom of God be established on earth. In many ways, this is perhaps the most difficult section. Today we echo the ancient cry: when, Lord, when? Yet we do not expect an early end to history or a restoration of paradise. Nevertheless, the conviction that God has a purpose for creation is central to biblical teaching, from Genesis to Revelation. Once again, Wesley's theme is scriptural.

So far, Wesley presents us with a conventional sermon – a text, followed by three points. Perhaps he should have ended there! One member of the congregation – Benjamin Kennicott, an eminent Hebraist – commented that 'Under three heads he expressed himself like a very good scholar, but a rigid zealot; and then he came to what he called his plain, practical conclusion. Here was what he had been preparing for all along.'[5]

It was this plain, practical conclusion that led the Vice-Chancellor to ask for a copy of the sermon – not because he wished to learn from it and apply its conclusions to his life, but rather to confirm his worst suspicions about its content. The result was that Wesley was never again invited to preach at St Mary's.

According to the note on the first page of the sermon, it had not been Wesley's intention to publish 'the latter part of the … sermon: but the false and scurrilous accounts of it which have been published, almost in every corner of the nation, constrain[ed him] to publish the whole, just as it was preached'. I find this note intriguing: did Wesley in fact regard his 'three points' complete in themselves, without this last section? Yet he says that the present format was how it was preached, and this final part seems to belong to the rest, for it is here that he applies his message to a particular congregation. Here, like John the Baptist addressing the Pharisees as 'a brood of vipers', he puts the boot in.

So what were the scurrilous accounts, to which he refers? Benjamin Kennicott said he liked some of this section: he approved, for example, of Wesley describing undergraduates as 'a generation of triflers'.[6] What don would not? But he found Wesley's conclusion presumptuous and far too censorious. William Blackstone, a lawyer, and later a famous judge, wrote as follows:

> We were last Friday entertained at St. Mary's by a curious sermon from Wesley the Methodist. Among other equally modest particulars he informed us; first, That there was not one Christian among all the Heads of Houses; secondly, that pride, gluttony, avarice, luxury, sensuality, and drunkenness were the general characteristicks of all Fellows of Colleges, who were useless to a proverbial uselessness. Lastly, that the younger part of the University were a generation of triflers, all of them perjured, and not one of them of any religion at all. His notes were demanded by the Vice-Chancellor, but on mature deliberation it has been thought proper to punish him by a mortifying neglect.[7]

Wesley's own words were certainly condemnatory. There were, he said, no Christian countries, no Christian cities. Addressing in particular all those entrusted with authority, he demanded, 'Is this city a Christian city? Is Christianity, *scriptural* Christianity, found here?' Again he reminds them what this means: 'Are we "holy as He who hath called us is holy in all manner of conversation"?' This is what he means by scriptural holiness – being like God (*IV.1–4*). After applying his questions particularly to the city dignitaries and magistrates in his congregation (*IV.5*), he turns to the dons – to the 'venerable men who are more especially called to form the tender minds of youth', demanding to know what kind of example they set their pupils, and whether they abound in the fruits of the Spirit. His answer would appear to be 'No', since

he goes on to accuse them of 'pride and haughtiness … impatience and peevishness, sloth and indolence, gluttony and sensuality' (*IV.6–7*). Applying his questioning particularly to those (including himself) who are 'called to minister in holy things', he asks, 'Do we know God? Do we know Jesus Christ? Hath God "revealed his Son in us"?' The questions appear to expect the answer 'No' (*IV.8*). As for 'the youth of this place', they are 'stubborn, self-willed, heady and high-minded', wasting their time and neglecting their studies (*IV.9–10*). The situation seems hopeless, and the sermon ends with a plea to God to save his people (*IV.11*).

Is this sermon relevant today?

Commentators suggest that Wesley would perhaps have been wiser had he omitted the last section and concentrated on the first three points – though the sermon would certainly not have received so much attention. Moreover, it is in this last section that Wesley does what all preachers should do: he shows the relevance of his comments for his congregation. We may well feel some sympathy for his hearers, and think that he was going too far: are his strictures not those of a somewhat straight-laced preacher who was out of touch with his audience? But Wesley's situation was very different from ours. He was living in a country which called itself Christian, and the same could be said of the city of Oxford and of the University. His sermon followed the pattern of the condemnations pronounced by Old Testament prophets. Whether, as someone who was no longer part of the university system, he had any hope of effecting reform seems doubtful. Today, interestingly, the Christian links are still claimed – tenuously – by our country, by most of our cities, and by our ancient universities – but the vast majority of those who belong to those three entities make no claim to be Christians. Certainly we can be sure that it would not be wise – or appropriate – for preachers today to make similar denunciations of their congregations! Nevertheless, some of the questions Wesley poses may still be relevant.

The purpose of this series on Wesley's sermons is to explore their usefulness for us today. Are they still of value? Do they represent the true characteristics of Methodism? Most of us would probably agree that we are more likely to find Methodism's core values in our emphases on mission, fellowship and social justice than in in our codes of discipline and our structures. But all these emphases are based on what Wesley called 'scriptural Christianity', and it is 'scriptural Christianity' which this sermon claims to expound. Does it?

The sermon is certainly scriptural at a superficial level, for it makes constant reference to Scripture. It is not so much an exegesis of Acts 4 – though Wesley returns several times to that passage – as an exposition which appeals to a large number of scriptural texts. But it is scriptural at a more fundamental level, for its basis is one which modern exegetes would recognise as a core theme of both Old and New Testaments – in other words, the biblical notion of 'holiness'. We have noted already that in the course of his concluding section Wesley defines scriptural holiness as *the call to be like God*: 'Are we', he asks, '"holy as He who hath called us is holy in all manner of conversation"?' (*IV.3*). This demand is certainly scriptural; in the Old Testament, we are told that God is holy, and called Israel to be holy. Jesus commanded his followers to be perfect, as God is perfect (Matthew 6:48). Paul describes how Christians are transformed into the image of Christ, reflecting his glory (Romans 8:29).

But what does this holiness mean? In the Old Testament narrative, the call came to Israel, rather than to individuals, and Israel was called to be a holy nation. God had chosen Israel to be his people, saved her from Egypt, and called her to be holy, as he was:

> I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am holy … For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy.[8]

It is significant that what God demands is based on what God has already done – in other words, on 'prevenient grace'. God has graciously chosen Israel as his special people, and her holiness depends on her relationship with him. She is to be holy as he is holy, to be *like* him. In Leviticus, 'being holy' is defined mainly in cultic terms. Israel is separated from other nations by rules about cleanliness. She must therefore keep the food laws and regulations about purity. Being God's holy people was interpreted by many as a demand to keep apart from other nations – to be different. The signs of this difference or purity were set out in the Law in terms of compliance to certain food laws and regulations regarding cleanliness. For individual members of the nation, it meant obeying the rules. This emphasis inevitably led to introspection, and to concern not only with Israel's holiness but with one's own. This understanding has its roots in the priestly tradition in the Old Testament, and was adopted later by the Pharisees, who also saw 'holiness' in terms of obedience to food laws and laws of purification, and a rigid adherence to all the commands of the Law.

There was another interpretation, however, normally referred to as the prophetic, which stressed the idea that being holy meant being *like* God. To

speak of his holiness is to speak, in effect, of what he is, so being holy means living according to the revealed character of God – that is, sharing his character, which was demonstrated in his grace, love, generosity, justice and concern for his creation.

This is why God's demands for his people can be summed up in Deuteronomy in the command to love God,[9] and and in Leviticus in the command to love your neighbour as yourself[10] – commands which Jesus famously brought together.[11]

The second command is the corollary of the first, for it depends upon it.[12] If you love God, you *must* love your neighbours, and Jesus maintained that 'neighbours' included *Gentiles* as well as Jews.[13] As the author of 1 John later insisted, you cannot claim to love God if you hate others.[14]

Biblical holiness is essentially *social* holiness, involving relationships within the community, as well as with God. Moreover, it involves relationships *outside* the community of Israel, for if holiness is seen in terms of reflecting the character of a loving, gracious and generous God, then his people were called not to treat him as their own possession but to spread knowledge of him to the nations. They have been called to be his witnesses. It was no wonder, then, that it was from this understanding of God's holiness that the conviction of the necessity for mission was born.

Like St Paul, Wesley moved from the Pharisaic interpretation of holiness as 'purity' to the prophetic understanding of it as a reflection of God's character of grace. God called Christians to be 'holy as He who hath called us is holy'. He moved from the Holy Club, with its emphasis on personal piety, and concern with one's own salvation, to an understanding of mission that embraced the whole world, and a longing to bring others to accept the gospel. Following his 'conversion', he comprehends holiness as something outgoing. The signs of holiness are no longer found in prayers, fasts and good works, but in the fruits of the Spirit that *lead* to 'good works'. This was why mission, fellowship and social justice all became marks of Methodism.

Wesley himself insists in this sermon that Christianity is not to be understood as a set of opinions or a system of doctrines, but as something which concerns hearts and lives – namely, the mind which was in Christ. It is this 'having the mind of Christ' that he understands as 'scriptural holiness', and certainly the idea that following Christ means not just following his teaching but becoming *like* him – and so like God – is found throughout the New Testament. The belief

that God called Israel to be his people – and that now, 'in Christ', Gentiles are incorporated into that people – means that the idea that we are called to share this holiness pervades the whole Bible. This is certainly scriptural Christianity – *authentic* Christianity. Wesley believed that Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness over the land. Is this still the conviction of those who stand in the Methodist tradition today? Is this still our mission? Do we still believe ourselves to be called to be 'holy, as God is holy'? If so, then the answer to the question 'What does this sermon do for us?' is that it expresses our core beliefs: the people called Methodists are called to spread this idea of scriptural holiness, not just throughout the land but throughout the world.

Notes

1. *A Short History of the Methodists*, 1781.
2. Charles Wesley, *Journal*, 24 August 1744.
3. John Wesley, 'The Large Minutes, in *Works*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 1829–1831, vol. VIII, p. 299.
4. The italic references in brackets refer to John Wesley's *Forty-Four Sermons* (London: Epworth Press, 1944), giving section and paragraph numbers.
5. See John Lawson, *Notes on Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons*, London: Epworth Press, 1946, p. 25.
6. Quoted by Lawson, *Notes*, p. 31, referring to comments recorded by Edward Sugden, in volume I of his edition of Wesley's sermons.
7. In a letter quoted by Lawson, *Notes*, p. 35, again based on the work of Sugden.
8. Leviticus 11:44. Similarly Leviticus 19:2; 20:26. Cf. Exodus 19:6; 22:31; Deuteronomy 7:6.
9. Deuteronomy 6:5.
10. Leviticus 19:18.
11. Mark 12:28–34.
12. To be sure, Paul quotes the second command, saying that it contains 'the whole law', in Galatians 5:14, without making any reference to the first; cf. also Romans 13:9f. Love for God is apparently taken for granted, but it is of course the corollary – love for one's neighbours – which needs to be spelt out.
13. Luke 10:25–37.
14. 1 John 4:20.