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The Abiding Mission of the Wesleys Shaping the Virtuous Heart

They insist that nothing deserves the name of religion but a virtuous heart, producing a virtuous life—[i.e.,] a complication of justice, mercy, and truth, of every right and amiable temper, beaming forth from the deepest recesses of the mind in a series of wise and generous actions.¹

So John Wesley summarized the central doctrine of Methodism in 1749 when seeking to counter opposition as the movement spread into Ireland. You can almost hear the weariness in his voice as he was forced to make this point again. It is the essence of the response that Wesley had been offering for years to the caricature of Methodists as enthusiasts, concerned only with religious emotionalism. It was pivotal to his rebuttal of the charge (typically made by Anglicans) that Methodists were antinomians since they taught salvation by faith. And it was echoed in his counter to the contrasting accusation (usually by dissenters) that Methodism was a form of works-righteousness, concerned only with observing external duties. Ironically, despite such repetition, many of their ecclesial descendants have also failed to appreciate the centrality of the virtuous heart to John and Charles Wesley's understanding of Christian life, thereby depriving these descendants of the brothers' mature wisdom about how such a heart is formed. As such, a brief reminder of this wisdom may be in order.²

The underlying conviction of the opening quote is that a virtuous life—a life marked by a general consistency of desirable (Christ-like) actions—does not emerge spontaneously. It must be grounded in, and flows from, appropriate deep dispositions in one's heart/mind. This insight was not a new discovery of the Wesley brothers. They imbibed it from their parents, particularly their

mother, who repeatedly exhorted her children about the importance of cultivating strong dispositions toward a virtuous life.

The echo of Susanna's voice is clear in an early letter of John:

"To love God I must be like him, holy as he is holy; which implies both the being pure from vicious and foolish passions and the being confirmed in those virtues and rational affections which God comprises in the word charity. In order to root those out of my soul and plant these in their stead I must use, (1) such means as are ordered by God, (2) such as are recommended by experience and reason."³

Two aspects of this resolution deserve particular notice. First, whatever he might have assumed about the strengthening role of the Spirit, John's main focus at this point was on what he must do to attain a virtuous heart. Second, the model of the virtuous life being invoked has a rationalist tone, casting our emotions and passions primarily as obstacles to the virtuous life.

Various influences surrounding Aldersgate (1738) contributed to change on both of these counts in John Wesley's understanding of Christian life. He came to appreciate more deeply how God's gracious initiative precedes and enables our participation in salvation, and he specifically came to appreciate the positive role of our emotions in mediating this initiative. These changes are reflected in a passage typical of his mature account of the virtuous life:

"We must be holy of heart and holy in life . . . But we must love God before we can be holy at all; this being the root of all holiness. Now we cannot love God till we know he loves us . . .

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And we cannot know his pardoning love to us till his Spirit witnesses it to our spirit.”⁴

We see here John’s seasoned conviction that rational persuasion alone cannot enable us to resist, much less overcome and heal, irregular appetites or passions (cf. Romans 7). He now rejected the notion of the human will as an innate store of power for spontaneous acts of volition, recognizing it instead as our capacity to be *affected* and to *respond* in turn. As such, it is only when our affections are addressed by the Holy Spirit, assuring us of God’s pardoning love, that we are responsively enabled to love God and others most truly.

While his personal experience and his reading in the emerging discipline of psychology convinced Wesley that our affections are responsive, this did not make them simply transitory. He recognized they can still be focused and strengthened into enduring dispositions—or, to use his favored term, into “tempers” (as in tempered metal). Indeed, Wesley frequently discussed sin in terms of a threefold division: sinful tempers, sinful words, and sinful actions. The point of this division was that sinful actions and words *flow from* corrupted tempers, so the problem of sin must ultimately be addressed at this affectional level. By corollary, the essential goal of all true religion became the recovery of holy tempers (i.e., the virtuous heart).

What are the dynamics of this recovery? There are indications surrounding Aldersgate that Wesley initially assumed his corrupt tempers would be immediately and completely transformed into holy tempers when he experienced God’s pardoning love. It was not long before he admitted that corrupt tempers remain in new believers, inclining them to sinful acts. But he quickly added that the Spirit’s restored presence enables them to resist the dominance of these tempers over their actions. More importantly, he continued to affirm that the Spirit’s goal is to bring greater freedom by transforming our tempers so that our deepest inclinations are to acts of love for God and neighbor. In the new birth God’s grace awakens in believers the seeds of the holy tempers, which can then strengthen and take shape as we grow in grace.

As was often the case, Charles captured these mature Wesleyan convictions about the goal and dynamics of salvation in a striking hymn, based on Philippians 2.⁵ The hymn begins with a lament of the lack of stability in a new believer:

**O how wavering is my mind,
Tossed about with every wind!
O how quickly doth my heart
From the living God depart!**

It moves to a plea that the virtues of Christ be implanted and nurtured:

**Plant, and root, and fix in me
All the mind that was in thee;
Settled peace I then shall find—
Jesu’s is a quiet mind.**

Subsequent stanzas appeal for virtues like gentleness, patience, love, and thankfulness, ending with the hope that:

**Lowly, loving, meek, and pure,
I shall to the end endure;
Be no more to sin inclined—
Jesu’s is a constant mind.**

In tandem with this growing recognition of the progressive dynamics of cultivating virtuous hearts/minds the Wesleys came to a deeper appreciation of the cooperant nature of this cultivation. John often made this point by quoting a proverb from the early church: it takes “the Spirit and discipline [to] make a Christian.” At one level, this stressed that while our desired transformation is possible only through God’s grace, the divinely-ordained way of planting, rooting, and establishing the virtuous heart is our regular participation in the “means of grace.” At another level, the proverb pointed to the more balanced and holistic set of the means of grace that the Wesleys developed over the years for their Methodist people. Specifically, they sought to weave together means that both expose us to the ever-deeper *empowering affect* of the Spirit and prod us to *exercise* our affections—shaping them into holy tempers.⁶

One of John’s most distinctive emphases in this regard was on the crucial contribution of works of mercy, as a means of grace, to forming the virtuous heart.⁷ Charles drew particular attention to the value of communal support and accountability, such as provided in the love feast, for which he penned these lines:

**Let us join (’tis God commands),
Let us join our hearts and hands;
Help to gain our calling’s hope,
Build we each the other up.
God his blessing shall dispense,
God shall crown his ordinance,
Meet in his appointed ways,
Nourish us with social grace.⁸**

Nourished and shaped by such means of grace, many in the early Methodist movement came to experience the freedom for virtuous living that springs from a virtuous heart. The wisdom that contributed to their transformation is surely still relevant today! □

1. John Wesley, “Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland,” July 6, 1749.
2. For more details see Randy Maddox, “A Change of Affections,” in *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard B. Steele (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 2001), 3-31.
3. Letter to Mrs. Mary Pendarves, July 19, 1731.
4. John Wesley, Sermon 10, “The Witness of the Spirit I,” vol. 1, I. 8., *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 274.
5. The complete hymn is found in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742), 221-223. John selected several stanzas for inclusion in the 1780 *Collection of Hymns*, #345. (Stanzas 2, 5, and 12 of this selection are quoted here.)
6. For more details on this point, see Randy Maddox, “Wesley’s Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ,” *Quarterly Review* 23.1 (2003): 15-28.
7. See particularly Sermon 92, “On Zeal,” vol. 3, II. 5., *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 313.
8. 1780 *Collection of Hymns*, #507, stanza 1.



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