

# John Wesley and Psychology

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John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement. As a significant figure in Christian history, Wesley has import for modern Christian psychology in at least four ways: (1) his contention that the findings of science could be used by Christians for the glory of God and the alleviation of human suffering; (2) his personal example of how difficult it is to put faith into practice in daily living; (3) his teachings about the grace of God and the possibility of Christian perfection; and (4) his concern for social justice and the welfare of the poor. This essay discusses these issues and demonstrates how a study of Wesley can influence modern Christian psychology.

John Wesley was the 18th Century Anglican priest whose ministry led to the establishment of the Methodist movement in England, Wales, Scotland, and the United States. Widely read in matters of public health, medicine, natural science, and social policy, as well as in the literature of the Christian tradition, Wesley is of unique interest to modern Christian psychology for several reasons.

First, Wesley became convinced that secular knowledge could be used to the glory of God (English, 1991; Wesley, 1751, 1760). He struggled with how to incorporate the discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton into his ministry (Wesley, 1777b). This issue is similar to that faced by those who would integrate modern psychology and Christian theology (Malony, 1986a). Wesley provides an example of a paradigm that can still be used.

Second, for much of his life, Wesley struggled personally with religious doubt, uncertainty, and temptation. His persistent search for assurance of God's love can serve as a reminder of the difference between verbal affirmations and the inner difficulty persons might have in following a counselor's encouragement to apply religion to their daily life.

Third, because of his own triumph over his doubts, Wesley came to have a unique understanding about the grace of God and the process of spiritual development. His teachings on these issues view God's grace as like a seed that can grow with proper intention (Wesley, 1777a).[1] Wesley's ideas are very similar to the insights of today's cognitive-behavioral psychologists about the ways to achieve self-mastery (Myers, 1993, p. 424ff).

Lastly, although Oxford educated and from a privileged family, Wesley had a strong passion for social justice and was deeply concerned about the welfare of the poor. The last letter he wrote (February 14, 1791-one week before he died) was to William Wilberforce encouraging him in his efforts to end slavery in the British empire (cf. Colson, 1987). He published a home health-care manual that went through thirty-six editions (Malony, 1996; Wesley, 1751). He balanced a burden for personal salvation with an ethical concern for justice. This approach ties Wesley to the Hebrew prophets of eighth century B.C.E. and the teachings of Jesus. It provides a worthy example of compassionate concern which today's Christian psychologists would do well to emulate (Malony, 1986b).

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## **John Wesley (1704-1791)**

A brief survey of his life will help locate John Wesley in Christian history. His ministry led to the establishment of the Methodist movement in England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, and the United States. His life spanned every decade of the eighteenth century. Like his father, Samuel, and his brother, Charles, Wesley became a priest in the Church of England. A graduate of Oxford, Wesley often preached but never functioned as a parish priest. Instead, he became a teacher of Greek and Hebrew at Lincoln College.

Although an ordained person, Wesley never felt sure of his own salvation and sought to cover up his doubts by over-zealousness. It might be conjectured that some of his pietistic compulsivity had its roots, in part, in his own psychological anxiety.<sup>2</sup> He preached faith, but was unsure of it himself. Out of a desire to assuage his own doubts about God's presence in his life, Wesley decided to leave Oxford in the mid-1730s and accept an invitation to become the chaplain of Georgia, a newly organized settlement in the new world. Troubled by his father's death and his own insecurity, Wesley entered into this new venture in hopes of converting the Indians and of "saving his own soul," as he wrote to a friend at Oxford.

Underneath his concern for the Indians was an interest in "folk medicine." Wesley thought that Indian medicine had not been contaminated by western ideas, which focused on expensive medications that only the rich could afford. Later in his life, this interest in medicine became a passion for the welfare of the poor for whose sake he wrote a home health care manual to be discussed in the final section of this article (Wesley, 1751).

An experience on the boat trip over to Georgia became very important to Wesley's Christian experience. The ship almost sank during an Atlantic storm. While Wesley was leading prayers in the bowels of the ship, a group of Moravian Christians remained on deck singing hymns as they continued going about their duties. Wesley was dumbfounded by their courage. He asked their leader how they had been able to remain calm in the midst of the storm. "Our people are not afraid to die," he was told. He was deeply impressed with the confident faith he saw in these unlettered Moravian Christians because it was so different from his own doubt and fears.

The conversion of the Indians was much more difficult than Wesley anticipated, and he had little chance to study their folk medicine. More importantly, however, was his experience with Sophie Hopkins, one of three women with whom Wesley was to have unfortunate experiences during his lifetime. He returned to England in the spring of 1738 feeling a failure both in romance and in evangelism.

For the next month, Wesley moped around London, feeling depressed and a failure. During this time he consulted periodically with the Moravian leader, Peter Bohler, over why he did not feel God's forgiveness for his sins. Bohler advised Wesley to "preach faith until he had it." On the night of May 24, he wandered into a Moravian prayer meeting on Aldersgate street where they were studying Luther's commentary on the book of Romans. He remembered the confidence the Moravians had shown during the Atlantic storm and hoped that he could reclaim his faith. During the meeting Wesley had a profound religious experience. The assurance of faith became real. He felt his "heart strangely warmed." He wrote that, for the first time in his life, he "did know his sins forgiven" (Wesley, 1738, p. 99). This sense of renewed faith became the passion of his life.

Within a few weeks of this experience, George Whitefield asked Wesley to take over his ministry of preaching in the fields near Bristol. Wesley decided to accept the invitation. After the response to his first sermon, Wesley became excited about the possibility that a similar revival might occur in Britain. Thus began almost fifty years of traversing the British Isles-preaching in the open air to those who would not come to church. It is estimated that, during his lifetime, Wesley traveled over 40,000 miles per year-first on horseback and then in a special coach with a writing desk and book shelves. There was a great response to his preaching, particularly among those who felt alienated from the Church of England. Some historians have judged Wesley to have saved Great Britain from the ravages of the French Revolution.

One of the reasons for his impact was what happened after his preaching. When he ended his revivals, he organized converts into class meetings. He anticipated the insights of social psychology about the importance of social support. Class members met weekly for encouragement and instruction. Each meeting began with the question "What is the state of your soul?" Wesley wrote directions for these class meetings and prepared materials from the classics for leaders to use in their preparation (Williams, 1960, p. 136; also see Outler, 1964, p. 180).

Wesley was a practical, rather than a systematic, theologian. His journal (reflecting his own Christian experience); his sermons (directed toward conversion and right thinking about spiritual growth); his books (concerning science as well as theology); his letters (often written to public figures about the affairs of the day); and his tracts (published as a means for influencing the average person) have left a rich legacy from which to infer Wesley's deep involvement in the pragmatic issues of Christian living. Because of his central focus on personal experience Wesley had been accused of having no interest in theology, but such a statement is far from the truth. He had strong doctrines of creation, salvation, assurance, and perfection-all worked out in the fire of his own, and his followers' life experience. His goal was always to make things "pure and simple by a lover of mankind and of common sense"-an appellation he often added to the titles of his books and tracts (cf. Wesley, 1760).

### **John Wesley on the Christian Response to Science**

**A** critical question for Christians is, "What shall be their attitude toward the findings of contemporary social/behavioral science, particularly those theories which ignore or deny the power of religion?" John Wesley addressed this question. Although living a century before the establishment of psychology as a science, Wesley was very involved in religious responses to the laws of mechanics proposed by Sir Isaac Newton (English, 1991; Haas, 1994a, 1995). Newton conceived of his scientific theories as the discovered laws of God. Many low-church leaders agreed with him and embraced the Newtonian world-view with enthusiasm. Yet, other high-church persons were suspicious that Newton's laws of the "Book of Nature" might supersede the revealed truths of the "Book of the Bible." Initially, Wesley embraced this point of view because he feared that such thinking might lead to deism or atheism (Hendricks, 1983). He felt that there was a danger that a mechanistic world view would result in perceiving God as an impersonal force rather than as a personal redeemer (cf. White, 1896, p. 128). However, Wesley later changed his mind and, like Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas before him, came to believe that logical reasoning, seen in science, could reveal the laws of God in nature (Haas, 1994b; cf.

Wesley, 1744b). Yet he also remained convinced that the Bible still contained the truths that could lead to personal salvation. Further, in an almost post-modern manner, Wesley frequently emphasized "the littleness (*or incompleteness*) of all human knowledge" (Wesley, 1784a, p. 337, parenthesis mine). In another sermon, "God's approbation of His works" (1782), he asserted "How small a part of this great work of God is man able to understand" (p. 206; cf. also in the sermon "The case of reason impartially considered, 1781).

Having conceived of Newton's ideas as posing no threat to matters of personal redemption, Wesley set out to study them for himself and digest them for the average person. He wrote a five volume work entitled *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation or a Compendium of Natural Philosophy* (1777b/1809). "Natural philosophy" was a synonym for "natural science" at this time. Wesley's prime interest, as stated in the introduction, was to summarize the theories of "the great Newton" (Wesley, 1784b). In the publishing of these volumes, Wesley affirmed Newton's contention in the founding of the Royal Academy of Science that discovering the laws of God could be put to use in the alleviation of human suffering. Once again, Wesley's pragmatic motivation can be seen. The study of science was, for him, a means for making life better-physically as well as spiritually. He was convinced that much suffering was caused by violating God's physical laws (cf. Wesley, 1751). Wesley conceived of nature as a harmonious divine creation whose laws, if followed, would help persons live fulfilled lives.

Wesley's model of the relationship between science and religion is a useful paradigm for contemporary psychology/theology integration. In a sense, it represents the contention that "all truth is God's truth." It provides a basis for saying that learning the laws of human behavior, determined by psychology, would be both useful and God-given. Those laws can be learned and applied with the confidence that they were put here in creation by God and can be used for the benefit of persons.

An intriguing example of Wesley's openness to science can be seen in his interest in the healing possibilities of static electricity which he had first seen in a public demonstration by Benjamin Franklin. Wesley seemed eager to embrace new ideas, particularly if they accorded with his conviction that a given discovery was part of God's plan for helping persons find health and happiness. Wesley's use of electricity for curing disease is an example of how psychological integrators can creatively apply science for human good.

Although most persons thought of static electricity as good entertainment, Wesley joined a handful of physicians in perceiving the healing possibilities of electric shock treatment. Wesley's interest led him to write *The Desideratum, or Electricity Made Plain and Useful by a Lover of Mankind and of Common Sense* (1760). This volume, coupled with the placement of electrical machines in all of his free clinics and his recommendations that "electrifying" would cure or help over 35 illnesses, led Wesley to be judged to be one of three most notable electrotherapists in the eighteenth century (Hill, Schiller, & Tyerman, 1981). His awareness of the psychosomatic underlay of many illnesses and his theological rationale for the use of electricity represent a valid combination of science and religion.

The static electricity machine, a replica of which can be seen in the museum of the mother church of Methodism on City Road in London, consists of a suspended hollow glass tube through which runs a metal bar that is attached to a handle for rotating the cylinder. A leather pad covered by a piece of black silk rubs against the cylinder as it is turned, thus creating a buildup of static electricity which can be dis-

charged by grasping a metal ball attached through a metal arm to inside the cylinder. The strength of the charge could be controlled by the number of turns of the cylinder. Electricity could be discharged *into* a person by grasping the ball or discharged *through* a person by holding one hand on the ball and the other hand on another piece of metal.

Of primary interest, however, is the theological rationale Wesley gave for his interest in the therapeutic use of electricity. He called electricity the "elixir of life" provided by God for use as a "non-natural remedy." Wesley decided that, in creation, God had made electricity the basic source of all human movement (Wesley, 1760). Note how this idea went beyond the Newtonian laws of mechanics that had postulated a static universe where movement was determined solely by mass, force, and gravity. Wesley felt that there was a deficiency or overabundance of electricity in almost every physical malady. For example, in mania there was too much and in depression there was too little electricity in the human body. Restoring the electrical balance was the key to restoring creation to the state God intended originally.

Wesley called these efforts to harness electrical current a "non-natural" way of capturing again the healing power of creation. The very discovery of a way to do this, that is, through a machine, was not natural; it was manufactured. But it was part of God's provision for restoration after the fall when creation had lost its original health (Malony, 1995). In his book, Wesley justified this approach thusly:

We know that the Creator of the Universe, is likewise, the Governor of all Things therein. But we know likewise, that he governs by *second Causes*: and that accordingly it is his Will, we should use all Probable Means he has given us to attain every lawful End. (1760, p. 29, italics mine)

These "second causes" were the ways that human investigators divined to control and direct the forces of nature for making human life more fulfilling.

What is innovative about Wesley's conjecture is its affirmation of technology and science as a God-intended means for benefiting humankind. Science, understood in this way, was God's way of restoring creation. God provided a means, through science, to redeem the world in spite of human sin.

Few divines have affirmed the importance of scientific discovery and application so strongly. Wesley provides a firm basis for today's integration of faith and science, or psychology and theology. Many of the non-religious, or secular, models of psychology could be affirmed as God-given, from this point of view. In this regard, it is important to remember that the Methodist slogan, originally attributed to Wesley, has always been "Let us join the sound mind and the warm heart (Wesley, 1744a), that is, let us unite our Christian experience with the use of reasonable thinking. The Wesleyan movement should always be thought of as a product of the Enlightenment rather than an off-shoot of the Protestant Reformation. Methodism has never been suspicious of science or secular education (Wesley, 1744b, 1745). In fact, one recent book written by a Methodist scholar was entitled *Loving God with One's Mind* (Trotter, 1987). In America, Methodism established over 200 colleges and universities, all of which had strong departments of science. As Haas (1995, p. 234) stated, for Wesley, "Science correctly understood was to serve the cause of Christ rather than to be feared"

## John Wesley's Personal Difficulty in Accepting God's Love

Another perennial problem faced by Christian psychologists is "whether and when to include religion in their counseling." As one who had great difficulty in feeling confident of God's love, Wesley provides a good personal example of the possibilities and pitfalls of applying the recommendations he received. Of course, John Wesley never went to a psychologist for counseling but he did seek counsel, particularly from his brother Charles and from other Christian leaders, such as the Moravian Peter Bohler. More importantly, he constantly engaged in "self modification," as the behaviorists might term it. His strong efforts to find assurance of God's love were definitely action oriented. Some even accused Wesley of deliberate works righteousness.

From the year 1709, when he was but a young boy, Wesley was considered as destined for a special role in life. At that time he jumped safely from the second floor of his burning home and was called thereafter by his mother "a brand plucked from the burning." He was caught between the grandiose expectations of his mother and the sympathetic indulgence of his father who, although supportive of holy habits and regular sacramental worship, told his son that the real test of faith was the "inner witness of the heart." While there are no indications that Wesley showed any evidence of psychological distress prior to age twenty-two, when he elected to follow his father's encouragement to become a priest, thereafter his obsessive compulsiveness became apparent. At that time he entered into a life-long effort to obtain an inner emotional certainty of his salvation through strenuous behavioral piety. His account of this decision, written some years after the fact attests to this frantic approach to attain religious assurance:

When I was about twenty-two, my father pressed me to enter into Holy Orders. At the same time, the providence of God directing me to Kempis' *Christian Pattern*, I began to see that true religion was seated in the heart (note: the inner spiritual witness) and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions (note; the compulsivity). I began to alter the whole form of my conversation and to set in earnest upon "a new life." I set apart an hour or two a day for religious retirement. I communicated (took the sacrament) every week. I watched against all sin, whether in word or deed. I began to aim at, and pray for, inward holiness (note: the attempt to combine outer actions with inner feelings). So that now, *doing so much and living so good a life*, I doubted not but I was a good Christian. (Wesley, 1738; italics in original; parentheses added)

This quote, from one of Wesley's accounts of his 1738 Aldersgate experience, clearly demonstrates his life-long dilemma. It can be seen that he wanted desperately to feel inwardly assured of his salvation but he was not content to accept this as a gift of God. He compulsively attempted to earn this inward witness by good behavior. His Moravian confidant, Peter Bohler, told Wesley to "preach faith until you have it; then you will preach faith because you have it." This Wesley did. Even in the midst of his worst depression the month before his Aldersgate experience, Wesley continued to preach faith in parishes around London and to regularly engage in pious actions-as if what he proclaimed with his mouth he felt in his heart.

Interestingly, going to the Moravian prayer meeting on the night of May 24, 1738 was not one of these pious behaviors. As he stated, "I went very unwillingly." As often happens in such situations, desperate psychological splitting occurred and Wesley's problem was resolved by an over-identification with one side of his dilemma (cf. Kallstad, 1974). His report testifies to this process:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death. (Wesley, 1738, italics in original)

The Aldersgate experience only partially resolved Wesley's dilemma. The inner assurance he had always sought was short-lived. This experience, long touted as a dramatic turning point, did not result in as much peace of mind as historians have claimed. Wesley's *Journal* is filled with references to fluctuations in his mood during the two years *after* Aldersgate (Outler, 1964, p. 14). It is likely that biographers have made too much of the Aldersgate experience. In all his writings, Wesley only mentioned it one other time. The road between 1738 and Wesley's death in 1791 was filled with periods of doubt as well as exultation. He continued to put much effort into seeking to make the inner peace he experienced at Aldersgate a fact of everyday life. There is a painting in the museum on City Road in London which pictures him in a semi-coma on his death bed with his arms raised high. According to an apocryphal story that as he was dying, Wesley was asked to raise his arms in response if he still felt assured of his salvation.

Wesley's religious experience is similar to that of Peter, the disciple. It did not follow a straight line but ebbed and flowed. The experience of the average person is probably very akin to that of Wesley and Peter. Redemptive truths are easily confessed but are only spasmodically felt. Counselors would do well to remember the difficulties persons experience in making the truths of the mind become the truths of daily life. As will be seen in the next section, Wesley's life experience with faith and doubt significantly impacted his theological reflections.

### **John Wesley's Doctrine of the Grace of God and the Possibility of Christian Perfection**

The question of whether assurance of God's love came all-at-once, as in Aldersgate-type experiences, or was a feeling that became stronger over an extended period of time became an important issue in Wesley's teachings. Although he remained convinced that the faith of *adherence* (the practice of the *means* of grace-worship, prayer, good works) would lead to the faith of *assurance* (inner certitude; religious *feelings* of certainty), Wesley still treasured dramatic episodes such as Aldersgate, during which a strong sense of security arose all at once (cf. Outler, 1964, p. 51 ff). He taught his followers to expect them but came to realize that the enthusiastic behavior of those who had such experiences could become problematic.

On the one hand, the behavior which accompanied Aldersgate-type experience in Wesley's followers became excessive at times. All of the behaviors reported by today's charismatic Christians were reported by Methodists in the eighteenth century. These included speaking in tongues, dancing, barking, faintings, and jerking.

Wesley tried to control these expressions through such sermons as "On enthusiasm" (1750) and "The witness of the Spirit" (1746). While he retained a conviction that faith must become personal through subjective experience, he became troubled by these behaviors. He felt that the behaviors that resulted from personal experience should be seen in good works such as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians, or in acts of mercy and justice such as seen in Hosea and Amos. Where witness to the Holy Spirit could be seen only in strange behavior, he felt this led to pride and grandiosity. As he stated:

Truly, when I saw what God had done among his people between forty and fifty years ago ... I could expect nothing less than that all these would have lived like angels here below ... But instead of this, it brought forth wild grapes-fruit of quite contrary nature ... It brought forth enthusiasm, imaginary inspiration, ascribing to the all-wise God all the wild, absurd, self-inconsistent dreams of a heated imagination. (1788)

The reputation of Methodists became tainted with the reputation of being "enthusiasts" who sought more emotional highs than pious behavior. Anglicans repudiated Wesley's claim that his was simply an evangelistic society within the Church of England. As an illustration of how these reactions to personal experience influence public reaction, one mental hospital reported in the early 1790s that during the past year it had admitted ninety-three patients for "madness and Methodism."

In his attempts to control the outbreak of these charismatic reactions, Wesley was significantly influenced by Jonathan Edwards' *Treatise on Religious Affects* (1746/1959). Edwards normalized subjective experience. Wesley agreed with his taxonomy of the emotions that should accompany spiritual experience. Although he disagreed strongly with Edward's "quietism" which disconnected any expectation or seeking for personal experiences of assurance, he nevertheless thought enough of Edward's treatise that he published an "extract" of his book-leaving out all of the Calvinistic theology in which human initiative was absent (Wesley, 1773).

Wesley was never fully successful in controlling these excesses and, in fact, an even more troubling concern became the claims of some of his followers that they had been "sanctified" by the visitation of the Holy Spirit and that they had attained a blessed state of sinlessness. This was in addition to their sense of assurance of God's love or any other feelings that their hearts had been "strangely warmed: This concerned Wesley greatly. Although he was convinced that growth toward perfection was possible, he did not think it occurred spontaneously in one experience. He parted with the Moravians over this issue. He was troubled by their pompous claims of sinlessness. He felt such assertions bordered on antinomianism-outrageous claims that persons could do what they wanted now that they had attained a new state of grace. On the basis of scriptural teaching and his own experience, Wesley felt that such claims were premature (Outler, 1964). He wrote a tract entitled "Cautions and directions given to the greatest professors in the Methodist Societies" (1762) in which he stated his disapproval of any "profession" of sinless sanctification.

Nevertheless, Wesley was convinced that "sinless perfection" was possible "in this life:" In the most famous of Wesley's tracts, entitled "A plain account of Christian Perfection as believed and taught by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley from the year 1725 to the year 1777" (1777a), Wesley proposed that "perfection



should be sought at least "five minutes before death." To be perfect meant, to Wesley, giving complete, undivided attention to seeking and following the will of God. He contended that this was possible because God's grace was a gift to people at the time of their conversion. This grace of God was like a seed that is planted in the heart of the believer. God intended the seed of grace to grow like a plant and all Christians should make the development of grace to be the goal of their lives. Wesley felt that this development could, like a plant with excellent fruit, reach a time of perfection when believer's lives were completely governed by God.

Wesley's doctrine of perfection united justification and sanctification. Justification of persons to God occurred at the time of conversion but sanctification came about over a lifetime. Although Wesley put great emphasis on human agency after conversion, he retained a strong doctrine of God's power and initiative in justification. In conversion, humans, through their free will, did not just "cooperate" with God. Instead they acted out of the "prevenient," or pre-existing, grace of God which God had implanted inside them in creation (Cannon, 1946, p. 114). After conversion, however, spiritual development depended heavily on human effort. Wesley felt that God's power was self-limited by human response. In the same vein, he felt that human response was real and that change was possible. He suggested that Christians should work toward becoming perfect in this life-at least "five minutes before death" The setting of a specific time was in response to Luther's contention that we should expect perfection, or a "fully righteous body," no sooner than five minutes after death (cf. Cannon, 1946, p. 242ff).

This difference between Wesley and Luther reflects a radical distinction in their views of the human being. Luther felt that human beings did not really change after conversion. They remain sinners who are saved by God's grace. God looks at them through the sinlessness of Jesus Christ. Prior to death God considers them righteous for Christ's sake. After death persons will be made truly righteous because God will clothe them with new righteous bodies. Grace, for Luther, is a change in God's perception; a new way of looking at persons. Grace, for Wesley, was an active ingredient implanted in the human heart, something inside persons as well as in God's perception.

As can be seen, Wesley's understanding resulted in a positive view of human capacity. According to Wesley, God expects humans to change through the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. There is a tradition, that continues to this day, of asking Methodist ministers, at the time of their ordination, if they intend to "go on to perfection in this life." They must answer "Yes." Lutheran ministers are asked no such question.

Although dissimilar to Lutheran tradition, Wesley's understanding of growth in grace leading to perfection embodies a view of human agency that would be compatible with much in contemporary cognitive/behavioral psychology (cf. Ellis, 1962; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). Therapy, from this point of view, involves helping people change their behavior by distinguishing between rational and irrational thinking, a la Ellis, and by reversing negative thinking, a la Beck, et al. Like Wesley, these authors presume that thoughts and intentions are the key to personal change. Further, Wesley, but not Luther, would have had much in common with many contemporary "faith development" theorists such as James Fowler (1981) who conceived of spiritual growth as occurring along a series of stages that eventuate in an optimal level of religious perception and understanding. While Wesley would probably view perfection as more behavioral than would Fowler, he would

agree on the centrality of cognition and intention. Both would be very optimistic about the possibility of humans developing spiritually. They would both see the value in unique single experiences as well as intentional daily effort.

### **John Wesley's Compassionate Concern for Justice and the Welfare of the Poor**

Yet another question with which Christian counselors have to deal is "How much should I become involved with the environment in which my clients live?" For Wesley, this question was phrased in this form, "Since I am an evangelist who is primarily concerned with the spiritual redemption of people, should I be concerned with their physical and social circumstances?" He answered a definite "Yes!" A dominant feature of John Wesley's life was his compassionate concern for justice and the welfare of the poor. Although from a privileged social class, Wesley had a strong social conscience. He continued throughout his life to be sensitive to the plight of those less fortunate. He serves as a worthy example for religious help-givers in every generation, such as modern Christian psychologists, who should feel called to be involved in all areas of life, not just helping them solve problems in weekly counseling sessions in the confines of their offices.

In addition to the numerous letters he wrote to public officials, such as the letter to Wilberforce on slavery noted earlier, Wesley made statements about social justice wherever he preached. When speaking at Stoke-on-Trent, he noted the low wages of potters and made public recommendations that pottery owners pay them a living wage. When he preached at Penzance he spoke out against smuggling after hearing that citizens were changing the lighthouse in an effort to cause shipwrecks. After the ships crashed on the rocks, these upstanding citizens joined the outlaw pirates in plundering ships to the utter disregard of loss of life and goods.

However, it is in matters of healthcare that Wesley's concern for the disadvantaged can be most clearly seen. Had he not become a priest, Wesley would likely have become a physician. He had a sincere desire to help people handle the sufferings of life-physical as well as spiritual. Quite early in his adulthood he had become disillusioned with the treatment afforded the poor. He observed that physicians shied away from offering services to those who could not pay for them.

Wesley was an avid reader and writer. He rose from sleep at 4:00 AM each morning and worked tirelessly preparing sermons, reading Scripture, digesting the classics, composing pamphlets, studying medicine, making judgments about current affairs and writing books. He was probably as well informed on the medicine of his day as many physicians. Here we see the seeds of Wesley's boldness in publishing a home health-care manual for the poor entitled *Primitive Physick: Or an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases (1751)*. This volume became the most popular home health-care manual of the eighteenth century and went through over thirty printings in Britain and America. Wesley contended that most, if not all, of his recommended ingredients could be found in a woman's kitchen and most of the treatments he recommended had gone through "experimentation" over many generations (cf. Malony, 1996).

In the book, Wesley gathered together cures for 288 illnesses. He arranged the names of the illnesses in alphabetical order and listed three to four cures for each one. He recommended trying the first and if that didn't work to try the second, etc. Beside each of the cures that he had personally tried, Wesley put a "T" and beside

those that always worked he put an "I" (for Infallible). While a number of the cures were quaint, others of them were as reputable as any used by regular doctors. Out of concern for cost, Wesley suggested that most of the ingredients for the treatments could be found in a woman's kitchen.

The reaction of the medical community was generally negative. Typical was the judgment of one of the queen's physicians who called Wesley a quack in Lloyd's *Evening Post*. Wesley responded with the following letter: "Dear Sir, My bookseller informs me that since you published your remarks on Primitive *Physick*, there has been a greater demand than ever. If, therefore, you please to publish a few further remarks you would confer a favor on your Humble Servant:" (Hill, 1958, p. 121). In an uncannily modern comment, Wesley defended his "dabbling" in medical affairs by stating "Neither Jesus nor His disciples derived their authority from the national licensing corporation of their day ... Licensing bodies may be set up as social safeguards or as protection for private interests ... unrecognized authority may bypass them or sweep them aside" (Hill, 1958, p. 15).

Out of a concern for the health-care which he felt that the poor were *not* receiving, Wesley reflected on providing free health care in clinics in London and Bristol in this manner: "For more than twenty years I had numberless proofs that regular physicians do exceedingly little good. From a deep conviction of this I have believed it my duty within these four months last past to prescribe such medicines to 600-700 of the poor as I knew were proper for their several disorders . ... Now, ought I to have let one of these poor wretches perish because I was not a regular physician? To have said, 'I know what will cure you, but I am not of the College; You must send for Doctor Mead?' Before Dr. Mead had come in his chariot the man might have been in his coffin" (Hill, 1958, p. 15). Wesley was so offended by what he considered British physicians' money obsession that he took matters into his own hand and provided free care for the poor.

It is possible to relate Wesley's concerns about health to many of the foci of modern health psychology (Malony, 1996). Wesley, just as health psychologists, was interested in the promotion of health, the prevention and treatment of illness, the identification of the causes of illness, and the improvement of the health care system. He recommended breathing pure air, eating temperately, exercising abundantly, getting plenty of sleep, having good bowel movements, and controlling the emotions. He based his admonitions on the biblical teaching that the body was the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19).

Wesley wrote many pamphlets calling for environmental change in housing, wages, community services, etc. He was convinced that many illnesses were provoked by trauma of stressful social conditions. He was very sensitive to psychosomatic illnesses and chided physicians who prescribed drugs when they should be listening with compassion. One of the entries in his personal journal recounted the story of a woman who had a chronic stomach ache over the death of her son but to whom doctors kept giving medications as if her problem was physical (Hill, 1958, p. 22).

Finally, he deplored the conditions of the hospitals and wrote out a long list of recommendations for people to use in the treatment of their loved ones when they were sick. Many of these concerns about health and social welfare resulted from his observations of the deplorable conditions in which common people lived. He is credited with coining the saying "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." His admonitions to the leaders of his societies had many references to health issues. Among

them was one which stated "Don't stink above ground" (cleanliness) and another "Kill yourself a little every day" (dieting)! One commentator wrote this about " Wesley's concern with health: "More than any other major figure in Christendom, John Wesley involved himself with the theory and practice of medicine and with specific principles and practices of ideal physical and mental health" (Vanderpool, 1986, p. 320).

Wesley combined his evangelistic concern for salvation with a sensitivity to how life situations and physical environments caused disease and suffering. His example is worthy of emulation by Christian care-givers who might be tempted to think that people could overcome any physical conditions if they had the proper attitude or applied their faith to their predicaments. He attended to issues of social injustice and welfare apart from concern for salvation in a way that Christian counselors could use as an example. As noted, many of his concerns parallel those of modern community and health psychology. Christian counselors should resist temptation to think that they fulfill their roles when they give good advice or encourage religious faith. People are often burdened down in a way that only material assistance can assuage. It is important to be sensitive to the fact that conditions under which people function can overwhelm any profit they might get from hours of counseling.

### **Conclusion**

This article has considered the life and work of the eighteenth century divine, John Wesley. Known primarily for his role as the founder of the Methodist movement, Wesley also evidenced deep involvement in improving the health and circumstance of common people. Four aspects of his life and teaching we considered to have import for modern Christian psychology: (1) his reactions to the scientific discoveries of his day, (2) his personal dealings with doubts about God's love, (3) his teachings about grace and spiritual growth, and (4) his concern for justice and welfare. He provides modern psychologists with a model relating faith with science. He exemplifies the way many people struggle with applying religion to their daily lives. His theological reflections about religious enthusiasm and the grace of God are very helpful in understanding human experience. His sensitivity to the importance of the influence of the environment and the need to be socially concerned is inspiring. Many of his persuasions parallel contemporary psychological approaches to problem solving and the importance of perception in human behavior. Overall, John Wesley should be considered a practical, psychological theologian whose life and teachings can be very informative and influential for those who would integrate their Christian faith with modern psychology.

### **Notes**

1. Most of the works of Wesley cited in this article were published in 1831 with T. Jacks as editor. This multi-volume set was republished by Zondervan in 1958. Original publication dates will be the only dates used in the text.
2. Outler noted that when he visited Moravian settlements in Germany after his Aldersgate experience, they barred Wesley from the Holy Communion because they considered him to be a perturbed individual (1964, p. 14). Note that this was after the experience of assurance which supposedly assuaged his doubts.

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