I teach a course in the theology of John Wesley, populated largely by United Methodist graduate students preparing for pastoral ministry. Wesley’s doctrine of “Christian perfection” figures centrally in that class, as it did for Wesley himself. Wesley was optimistic about the possibilities of grace in transforming human life, both personally and socially. He taught that Christians should not reconcile themselves to the sin in their lives but should press on toward a holy, or sanctified, life. That life is governed by singleness of intention, where sin is increasingly expelled as love increasingly fills the heart. It is a life where, through the power of the Holy Spirit, our souls are renewed after the image of God. Christian perfection, as the aim of the holy life, is “the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions.”

As we discuss Wesley’s doctrine together in class, however, I regularly discover that the great majority of these students have heard very little about this subject, especially if they have grown up in the United States. If what my students tell me is correct, Christian perfection is rarely preached from Methodist pulpits, and it is the focus of any sustained religious education in Methodist circles only infrequently. Not only does the doctrine no longer figure prominently in United Methodism but also the very notion of living a holy life with victory over sin is rarely held out as a serious possibility for the Christian. Rather, the Christian walk has been reduced to something more like, in the words of John Howard Yoder, “the general label for anyone’s good intentions.” I take it that this loss is an enormously important development for Methodism given, for example, Wesley’s statement made late in his life that the doctrine of Christian perfection is “the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.”

Those of us who were raised in churches that descended from Methodism but were the product of the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement have had a very different experience from that of my United Methodist students. In the Church of the Nazarene, for example, we were consistently exposed to the doctrine of holiness and urged to take seriously the ideal of the “holy life.” Unfortunately, the holy life was construed rather legalistically. Then, too, Christian perfection was typically reduced to a single experience subsequent to conversion—a “second work of grace” called “entire sanctification.” In fact, I can still remember the standard pattern for those of us who attended Nazarene summer youth camp. We would get saved on Monday or Tuesday night, and by Thursday night we had sufficiently matured in Christ so as to be ready to heed the evangelist’s invitation to receive a “second blessing” and be entirely sanctified! This is clearly a distortion of Wesley’s teaching on the subject, where movement from new birth toward Christian perfection is hardly brief or effortless, but it is a lifelong and daily process of availing ourselves of means whereby the Spirit tempers our thoughts, actions, and inclinations toward love. Simply because the doctrine of Christian perfection is more
prominent in some branches of Wesleyanism than in others is no guarantee that we are better off in those places where it is more prominent. It could even be that the United Methodist neglect of the doctrine of Christian perfection is a reaction to and rejection of the legalistic and emotional excesses of Holiness and Pentecostal branches of Wesleyanism.

I suspect, however, that the relative neglect of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection in United Methodism cannot be adequately explained as a mere reaction to the excesses or distortions of other religious groups. There are, in fact, significant dynamics in contemporary Western culture that militate against the plausibility of the doctrine and that make it difficult to believe in, hope for, or move toward the holy life. There are at least four of these dynamics: (1) A pervasive individualism and focus on self-fulfillment; (2) a drive toward cultural conformity; (3) a rejection of discipline and the careful cultivation of intentional life habits with, instead, a distinct preference for the quick and painless; and (4) a general pessimism about the possibility of human transformation. Clearly, some of these dynamics may always be part of the human condition. But on all four points the Wesleyan understanding of Christian holiness runs counter to prevailing sentiments. In order to move toward a contemporary rediscovery of what it means to live the holy life—a life lived in the Spirit and oriented toward our perfection in love—we will need to find plausible ways to respond to each of these dynamics.

Community

If, as Wesley says, Christian perfection is a total renewal of ourselves after the image of God, then that image must be understood as essentially social. The image of God in which we are created is not a “thing” or “substance” but fundamentally a capacity for relationship. Our original condition, however, is that we come into the world with that image already tarnished and distorted. We are instead turned in on ourselves and seek our own will and pleasure. Our inclinations are toward self rather than toward God and others. The holy life is nonetheless possible, taught Wesley; and this possibility is premised upon the conviction that our capacity for relationship may be healed in this life. Rather than being forever focused on ourselves, we can become increasingly turned outward toward God and neighbor so that love rather than selfishness is our most natural response. In fact, it is only to the extent that this relational healing begins to occur that we can even begin to love ourselves properly.

Holiness, therefore, is by its very definition a relational matter. When we are talking about the holy life, we do not mean a private or merely inward transformation of individual, self-contained egos that may at best have social consequences. We are instead talking about a transformation of the self to community and in community. Community is both the context out of which holiness arises and that toward which holiness aims. As Wesley put it, “‘Holy solitaries’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”

One of the problems associated with the Wesleyan tradition, born as it was into a Western post-Enlightenment culture and even more so as it passed into the highly individualistic culture of the United States, is that the very
nature of Christian holiness (as well as the person and work of the Spirit in making us holy) tended to be interpreted in ways that were overly individualistic and anthropocentric. Even Wesley himself, despite his strong advocacy of social holiness and his frequent envisioning of sanctification as ultimately even cosmic in scope, often presupposes an anthropology that is rather atomistic. The net result is that holiness is construed in terms that are excessively private, individualistic, and inward-focused. The Holiness Movement of the nineteenth century often exacerbated this tendency and, insofar as it also emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification, frequently pressed the doctrine of the Spirit into molds that were highly privatistic and, to a large degree, oriented around personal emotions.

So, for example, the Book of Acts (a book that is about the work of the Holy Spirit if any book in the New Testament is) was often studied by Holiness Christians who looked for models of how individuals are sanctified and filled with the Spirit. Frequently overlooked, however, were the radically social dimensions of the Spirit’s activity in creating holy communities. Indeed, whenever the Holy Spirit shows up in the Book of Acts, social categories are being obliterated as new communities of faith are being formed from across ethnic, cultural, and gender lines. It is not that these new communities simply provided a space where holy persons could congregate. These communities were, by their very existence, a testament to the meaning of holiness. The very fact that reconciliation was happening in community was a live embodiment of Christian holiness in both its personal and corporate dimensions. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have no greater task than to imagine with renewed creativity and courage new communities of the Spirit that model what is meant by the holy life.

**Deviance**

Despite growing signs that human beings in our society continue to have a deep hunger for authentic community, it is undoubtedly true that this communal path to the holy life flies in the face of the rank individualism, consumerism, and fixation on self-fulfillment that is so characteristic of late modern Western culture. Contemporary models of social holiness will very likely, therefore, be countercultural and deviant. It will always be easier, of course, simply to “play church.” Those institutions that capitulate to a consumeristic mentality, marketing the gospel in terms that are palatable to the contemporary quest for self-fulfillment, will most likely continue to grow and thrive. Methodists should be careful, however, not to go chasing after these models out of an anxiety over recent numerical decline. It may well be true that it is the very nature of the church to grow, but so it is with the nature of cancer. We are not, therefore, to pursue church growth, but rather “peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). The size of a congregation is no indication whatsoever of its capacity both for engendering and for embodying authentic Christian community and holiness.

So, for example, while the fact that 3,000 persons were added to the church on the day of Pentecost is remarkable, that fact in and of itself bears no relationship to the holiness of the church. What is remarkable in the Pentecost story is the holy deviance of these early Christian communities—the way, for example, lines of gender and ethnicity were crossed so that “every nation under heaven” was able to hear the gospel in its own
language (Acts 2:5-11) and so that the Spirit was poured out on both men and women alike (2:18). What is noteworthy is that those who believed “had all things in common” and began to “sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (2:44-45). What is unprecedented is that not one of them considered his or her belongings to be private property, but rather all things were common property and “there was not a needy person among them” (4:32-34). Whether we are talking about twelve people or twelve hundred people, it is this kind of embodied witness to the subversive and deviant values of God’s reign that makes the church holy.

Douglas Strong, in his analysis of nineteenth-century holiness preachers, notes that one of their most common character traits was “eccentricity.” In fact, one such preacher, Cary Allen, was referred to by his nineteenth-century biographer as having had a “sanctified eccentricity.” The word eccentric literally means “outside the center,” or “off-center.” Someone is eccentric if he or she deviates from the norms of accepted conduct. Eccentric was an appropriate designation for these preachers, says Strong, for they “gloried in their peculiarity and scoffed at pretension and ascribed status.” In fact, accusations of “eccentricity” were even worn like a badge of honor by these preachers who understood themselves to be challenging religious and social structures. By accepting this label, they were “deliberately contrasting themselves with the polished mores and religious sophistication of genteel culture—values that represented the privileges only available to a few. They challenged the hierarchical power structures of their day, and especially the institutionalism of the mainline churches.”

Strong notes that these countercultural holiness preachers would often appear disheveled at their meetings, not because they were sloppy dressers or poor groomers but because, in the words of nineteenth-century minister David Marks, they wanted to be “independent from the changeable fashions of this age of superfluities.” Their eccentricity was a refusal to be Christians who were tied to the center of society; it was a refusal to accommodate the gospel to the demands of a consumer culture.

Sloppy dressing and poor grooming are probably inadequate as marks of the holy life, and yet something like a contemporary version of “sanctified eccentricity,” with its rejection of cultural conformity, may be precisely what is needed if social holiness is to be a serious option for Christians today. Thus, even though the culture teaches us that it is good to seek wealth and possessions, the Spirit invites us to downward mobility, solidarity with the poor, and simplicity. Though our culture suggests to us that we are individual, unrelated, and self-contained egos, the Spirit invites us to undergo a conversion to community. Though the world claims that our value is determined by our exchange value in terms of our contribution to the service of Mammon, the Spirit reminds us that our value rests simply in the fact that we have all been created in the image of God and that we may accept one another as equals because all barriers to such acceptance have been demolished in the cross.

In every respect, the path of the holy life stands as an alternate and deviant witness to the presence of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that opens our eyes to new possibilities and, indeed, to a new creation. Thus, when the world suggests that power is measured in terms of our ability to wield influence over others, the Spirit points us to the
kind of power found in the manger and in the cross. When our culture preaches an unrestricted freedom that is little more than the freedom to consume and accumulate, the Spirit offers a brand of liberty that is a freedom for the other. When our society teaches us that we should get what we deserve and that justice is defined by giving to others exactly what they deserve, the Spirit offers us the possibility of a creative, redemptive, and restorative justice—one that treats others precisely the way we have been treated by God: in ways that we don’t deserve.

If there is to be a recovery of the holy life among Methodists, not only will holiness need to be embodied in eccentric ways that refuse to play according to the rules of our culture, but there must also be a conscious inclusion of those whose very existence is eccentric—people who live at the margins, those who are poor and disinherited. Our acceptance by God in Christ compels us to move beyond ourselves toward others, to welcome the stranger, to open our hearts to the one who is different. To be eccentric is not to exist for oneself but to find one’s center outside of oneself. And that is why the holy life is fundamentally eccentric. Our center is in Christ, but Christ is in the world—in the poor, the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, the sick, and the stranger (Matt. 25:31-46). It is there that we encounter Christ. The church that allows not only its sense of mission and experience of worship but also its institutional life and internal organization to be shaped by the needs of those outside itself will be revolutionized from outside itself. And here is the great irony of the matter. The life of Christian holiness is life in a community of deviants who have determined no longer to play by the world’s rules. But it is precisely in no longer playing by the world’s rules that we discover a new openness to the world.

The most radical thing that the church can do today, therefore, is simply to be the church, to live together according to an alternate reality. The church that embodies a holy deviance does not need to look for evangelistic programs or strategies. The church is the evangelistic strategy. The community of faith itself constitutes an invitation to the holy life by its very existence “as an unprecedented social phenomenon” in which reconciliation occurs, the poor are valued, violence is rejected, and patterns of domination and subordination are refused. As Yoder says, “The challenge to the church today is not to dilute or filter or translate its witness in such a way that the world can handle it easier or without believing, but so to purify and clarify and exemplify it that the world can recognize it as good news.”

I believe that the twenty-first century will witness a new holiness movement. It will not be merely a reaction to previous distortions or a recovery of the eccentricity of nineteenth-century holiness preachers. The twenty-first century will witness a new social holiness movement that is more comfortable on the edges of culture than at the center. It is possible for Methodists to write that history.

Discipline
The holy life, especially because it is communal, is not easy. It does not descend from above ready-made—and this despite the fact that holiness is ultimately the result of the Spirit working in our lives. “If a man preach like an angel,” wrote Wesley, “he will do little good without exact discipline.” The problem is this: we want to be Christlike; we want hearts filled with love; but we are attached to “things,” and without freedom from this
bondage, we cannot really begin to serve God or neighbor as we should. The fact that it is this attachment to the world that is so critical a problem should not, of course, lead us to devalue the world or the realm of the physical and material. On the contrary, a life of holiness liberates us for the world and all of its beauty and goodness. In fact, the path of discipline through which Wesley believed God’s grace operates is “worldly” through and through. Take, for example, the discipline of “constant communion.”12 It is precisely in and through the grace mediated through the simple, physical elements of bread and wine that we are strengthened to resist the temptation to hoard and accumulate physical possessions. It is in sharing the physical elements of the Eucharist with the wider community of believers that we become increasingly sensitized to the needs around us and so become careful not to consume or stockpile the goods of the world while others lack.

Any recovery of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection in the twenty-first century will have to include some recovery of the disciplines apart from which no such perfection is possible. For Wesley, of course, those disciplines include centrally an attendance upon all the means of grace. While Wesley believed that Christ is the only meritorious cause of grace in our lives, the Spirit applies Christ’s work in our lives through a variety of means. There is no single path here, but, rather, as Wesley says, “there is an irreconcilable variability in the operation of the Holy Spirit upon the souls of people.”13 Wesley tended to focus much of his energy on those means of grace that were specifically instituted by Christ, such as prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord’s Supper, fasting, and Christian fellowship. The priority that he assigned to these means was based upon his belief that their consistent practice nurtured in us an openness and responsiveness to the work of the Spirit. For the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is one that is cooperant through and through. In and through the means of grace—through remembering, studying, seeing, singing, confessing, listening, giving—we avail ourselves of the Spirit’s sanctifying power. So, for example, in assessing why it is that in so many places where converts to Christianity have been made, there is such little evidence of the fact, Wesley writes:

It was a common saying among the Christians in the primitive church, “The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian”—implying that none could be real Christians without the help of Christian discipline. But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians, for where is Christian discipline! In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now whatever doctrine is preached where there is not discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers.14

What happens through the disciplined life is that our thoughts and inclinations are really being tempered, purified, or “patterned” after the mind of Christ. At one level, this patterning is clearly conscious as we learn more about Christ and his “way.” At another level, however, this patterning is somewhat unconscious as we are habituated to Christlike ways of responding to one another. For this reason, Wesley placed a high priority on the very structures by which we intentionally enter into community (for example, his system of societies, classes, and bands) and felt that here, more than anywhere else, he had found a way of restoring something of the original genius of the Anglican Church.
Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time
to time? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone is Christian fellowship:
But, alas! Where is it be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please: Is this Christian
fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connexion is
there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What watching over each other’s souls? What bearing
of one another’s burdens? . . . We introduce fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have
been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work.15

One could easily talk about other disciplines by which the holy life is formed; for example, what Wesley spoke
of as “works of mercy.” These practices of personally visiting the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned and of
tending to their needs through ministries of food, clothing, shelter, health, and education were to be carried out,
first, because the Lord commanded it16 and, second, because they are necessary for our own salvation. But such
practices were also to be carried out for the “continuance of that faith whereby we ‘are’ already ‘saved by
grace.’”17 Wesley defends works of mercy as “real means of grace” whereby “God is pleased, frequently, yea,
ordinarily to convey his grace to them that either love or fear him.”18 In fact, in his sermon “On Zeal,” Wesley
even places works of mercy in a closer proximity to the soul of love than he does the more traditional “works of
piety,” such as reading Scripture, prayer, fasting, and the Lord’s Supper!19

One of the real problems in bringing forward the importance of discipline and the means of grace into our time
is that the weight of tradition is toward reducing these disciplines to religious observances such as the
aforementioned “works of piety.” Notwithstanding the importance of such religious observance in patterning our
lives after Christ, it is nonetheless in the ordinary world of buying and selling, working and playing, living and
loving that one finds the substance of the discipline required for living the holy life. Perhaps that is why Wesley
writes so much on the economic life and the disciplines of love that were required for a sanctified approach to
wealth and possessions. As Theodore Jennings puts it, “Holiness cannot consist in religious observances. These
can only be means of grace, not the aim or goal of grace. They are helps to holiness, not the marks of it or the
content of it. Holiness must consist in a reversal of the worldliness of economics.”20

If we are to move toward a contemporary recovery of Wesley’s doctrine of holiness, it will be only insofar as we
are able to demonstrate the viability of a serious holiness discipline in the arena of our economic lives. The first
step in this discipline, for Wesley, was a flat rejection of the misguided notion that we may do whatever we like
with our possessions—a notion that, for Wesley, amounted to little more than atheism. Wealth invariably tends to
insulate and isolate us from human need and is, accordingly, extraordinarily dangerous. Its effects upon us are
often gradual and barely perceptible, but the only way to break the deadly hold that riches have on us is to
develop the discipline of giving all we can. The discipline of a holiness economics does not, of course, denounce
hard work or the making of a profit; neither does it discourage making adequate provision for the necessities of
one’s life and family. But the purpose of making any money above these basic necessities is for the sole purpose
of giving it away; thus, Wesley’s famous threefold economic discipline: “Gain all you can, save all you can, give
all you can.” The disciplines of “saving” (which meant not accumulating but rather being frugal) and “gaining” were wholly oriented toward the discipline of giving. Apart from this third discipline, they could even be downright sinful.

The implications of a holiness economic discipline are radical; they form a break with almost every tenet of conventional wisdom about finances, both in our day and in Wesley’s. As Albert Outler once wrote, “On no other single point, save only faith alone and holy living, is Wesley more insistent, consistent—and out of step with the bourgeois spirit of his age.”

But thanks be to God, we do not have to go at these disciplines alone. Again, it is the very purpose of the Christian community to serve as a visible and deviant model to the world of an alternate reality—and to serve as instruments of strengthening and nurturing one another in that task.

**Expectation**

On more than one occasion, I have seen a bumper sticker that reads, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.” A Methodist should be uncomfortable with the options. That we are forgiven is, of course, good news. But the very core of the Wesleyan message is that “just forgiven” so truncates the full message of the gospel as to distort it. And yet it would not be too much of a stretch, perhaps, to suggest that the theology expressed by this bumper sticker is a fundamental plank in the predominant consensus of most Christians in the West, regardless of denominational attachment. We have made peace with sin. While confident in the sovereignty of grace to forgive us, we are generally pessimistic about the power of grace to transform us. This mentality has so pervaded our theology, in fact, that we come to expect little more than mere forgiveness in our lives. What is more, we want the world to know that it should not really expect much more from us either—the public display of this bumper sticker serves this very purpose. Given the way many of us drive, perhaps that is why we would even place such a sticker on our automobiles!

Wesley, however, believed that Christians should expect much more than mere forgiveness. And he believed that this expectation itself was critically related to the growth and transformation that we might experience. According to Wesley, even though Christian believers know that sin is still at work, they also know the promise of “entire renewal in the image of God,” and so expect the fulfillment of that promise. It is this very expectation, in fact, that motivates the disciplined life already mentioned. Of course, the fact that Wesley encouraged his people to “go on to perfection” and urged them to expect to be made “perfect in love” in this life was bound to create fears that this would encourage self-righteousness or cause people to be deluded about reality. Some of the most impassioned attacks against Wesley were in response to his advocacy of Christian perfection.

And yet Wesley knew that the postures of hope and expectation have an enormous impact on our spiritual growth. He knew that it is impossible to move forward in the holy life without expectation. Indeed, one of the reasons why Christians remain in the “wilderness state” is that they expect little more than darkness and are taught to expect little more. Perhaps the wars, holocausts, and scandals of the twentieth century have weared us of hoping for too much out of ourselves. Maybe consumerism as a way of life has numbed us to the
possibilities of genuinely loving God and neighbor more than cars, houses, and electronic equipment. But holiness is not our own doing. Our expectation for the holy life should be as great as we know God’s love and power to be—in short, unbounded. One thing is certain. Our limitations today are not because of expecting too much but because of hoping for too little. Not by ourselves, but together as a community lived in the Spirit, perhaps even in the twenty-first century, we will be able to believe what Wesley himself believed:

We expect to be “made perfect in love,” in that love which “casts out” all painful “fear,” and all desire but that of glorifying him we love, and of loving and serving him more and more. We look for such an increase in the experimental knowledge and love of God our Saviour as will enable us always to “walk in the light, as he is in the light.” We believe the whole “mind” will be in us “which was also in Christ Jesus”; that we shall love every man so as to be ready “to lay down our life for his sake,” so as by this love to be freed from anger and pride, and from every unkind affection. We expect to be “cleansed” from all our idols, “from all filthiness,” whether “of flesh or spirit”; to be “saved from all our uncleannesses,” inward or outward; to be “purified as he is pure.”23

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Endnotes
7. Ibid., 19.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 20.
10. Yoder, For the Nations, 41.
11. Ibid., 24.
15. Works (Jackson), 8: 251-52.
16. “Yet I find time to visit the sick and the poor; and I must do it, if I believe the Bible.” “Letter to a Member of the Society, Dec. 10, 1777,” in Works (Jackson), 12: 304.
18. Ibid., 385.