

John Wesley was the son of a clergyman of the Church of England. (1703-1791) He was an earnest young man and was involved with a group of students at Oxford University called the Holy Club. They prayed together and read the Bible. They fasted and attended communion weekly. They visited the poor and those in prison. They wanted to combine piety and good works.

After his ordination John Wesley travelled to the British colonies in North America to be a missionary. Though he wanted to convert the indigenous people he spent most of his time with the English community. It was an unhappy and unsuccessful time. He returned to England troubled in spirit.

He met up with German evangelical Christians called Moravians and they spoke to him of the great Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. Wesley knew himself to be a Christian, but he longed to have a personal experience of God. He prayed about this and wrestled with his own soul before God.

It was at a meeting of Christians at Aldersgate Street in London on 24th May 1738 that he had an experience of God's grace that helped him to move from being a servant of God, to being a friend of God. Light entered his life; he came to accept that he was known and loved by God in a personal way, and that Christ had died for his sins. From this time on we see a new boldness in Wesley's life. He began his street preaching and travels soon after.

John Wesley worked out an understanding of God's purpose. He formulated it in this way:

All need to be saved.

Each of us encounters the world as imperfect. We speak of this in many ways. We see hostility and brokenness. This is not just out there, but in our lives as well. We may long to be and do what is good but constantly disappoint ourselves. We know that this problem about being human is not superficial. Rather it is deep and profound, and affects every life in every society. The image of God is distorted in each of us. We call it original sin.

All can be saved

Wesley was convinced that God's saving action was radical enough to be a remedy for the human situation. Furthermore, God's solution was not confined to a small number of people, to an elite, to a superior class or to one culture. God had the answer that the world needed! It was available to all people and to all communities. No one should despair or be without hope.

All can know that they are saved

John Wesley had known the Good News, not as a theory, but as an experience. It was not information, but saving knowledge that set up a dynamic in his life that was ongoing. At times he hesitated and doubted, but for the most part there was a new confidence that he was known and loved and redeemed. He was convinced that every person could know this.

All can be saved to the uttermost

This was Wesley's way of saying that the saving work of God reaches the deepest parts of our lives. There is resistance within our heart, and our will is not always co-operative: but the power of God seeks to find a way to make us free and to heal our spirits. The change that the grace of God works within us transforms our attitudes, our relationships, our way of seeing the world and gives us a new and living hope.

Prevenient grace

It was typical of John Wesley that he should find a middle way in thinking about how salvation can be found. Some thought we are so fallen that God needs to do everything. Others thought that salvation depended on what we do. Wesley spoke of God's prevenient grace that goes before each person seeking to open our hearts to all that God wants to do in our lives. This preserved God's initiative while enabling, but not forcing, our response and co-operation.

Justification

Out of love God sought to find a way in which our separation from God could be overcome. It was through the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection that God healed this alienation. Jesus' death on the cross, revealed the cost of restoring this relationship. It showed that God was prepared to suffer for us and with us. Wesley spoke of this atonement as restoring the distorted image of God within each person, and therefore our ability to respond in spirit.

Conversion

With joy Wesley preached what he had discovered. God's grace could bring to life in each person what had been accomplished on the cross of Christ. Once a person appreciated that they were "saved by faith through grace" the Holy Spirit brought about the new birth in each believer. Old loyalties were broken. Life was now lived in relationship with God in the supportive community of those whose spiritual lives had also been awakened.

Sanctification

Beyond conversion there was a long journey ahead for each pilgrim. Wesley nurtured this process of sanctification. It involved growth in Christian character, in a life of prayer, of service and witness. This would involve struggle and a confrontation with temptations. There would be a growing assurance of the work of the Holy Spirit within. A providential hand would be seen guiding one's life toward holiness.

Perfection

The work of God's Spirit continues to be active in the life of the believer right up to the point of death. God's grace creates the mind of Christ in each disciple. We are not content till we have "grown into the full stature of Christ." The word 'perfection' caused debate for Wesley, but he saw Christian perfection as knowing "an unbroken relationship with God." In this process we are purified and refined by grace and prepared for an uninterrupted life with God's glory.

O Thou who camest from above
The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for Thy glory bum
With inextinguishable blaze;
And trembling to its source return,
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus confirm my heart's desire
To work, and speak, and think for Thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire,
And still stir up Thy gift in me.

Ready for all Thy perfect will,
My acts of faith and love repeat,
Till death Thy endless mercies seal,
And make the sacrifice complete.

Charles Wesley 1707-88

Methodist Church of New Zealand
Te Hahi Weteriana O Aotearoa

Spiritual Life in the Wesleyan Tradition



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This Little Essay was written by the
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"For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness ... the only thing that counts is faith working through love." Galatians 5:5-6