

## Wesleyan Spirituality

It is now three hundred years since the birth of John Wesley in 1703. The world family of Methodists, which numbers 80 million, continues to look to its founder for inspiration. John Wesley, clergyman of the Church of England, led an evangelical revival that was focused on the preaching of the gospel. At home in the church, nevertheless he was led by the Spirit of God to preach to those outside the church.

Wesley was convinced that the grace of God was at work in every person. He believed that all needed to be saved: all could be saved; all could know they were saved, and that all could be saved to the uttermost. The grace of God was universal in its scope.

A heart strangely warmed.

Many Methodists have placed great emphasis on Wesley's experience of the 24th May 1738. Writing in his journal Wesley records that, "I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change 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."

For Wesley the heart was not so much the seat of emotions. It was, as Runyon says, "the motivational core of the person, the centre of loyalty, commitment and action." A new self-understanding was born. Salvation was not earned but offered by Christ. It was in the heart that the revolution of the Holy Spirit took place. We may recognize this moment in 1738 as a decisive spiritual experience that gave Wesley a new freedom. He described it as the movement from a servant to a child of God.

A soul strangely awakened.

John Wesley's greatest contribution was the rediscovery of the work of the Holy Spirit. His preaching emphasized turning toward God and the restoration of the image of God within each person. He also focused on the growth of each person to Christian maturity. This Wesley called sanctification. It was a process that the believer was drawn into and it lasted a lifetime. The dynamic of transformation involved struggle with inner resistance.

To support the awakening of the soul and sustain its growth, Wesley developed a nurturing environment. He invited converts into classes for scripture reading, prayer and reflection on the quality of their discipleship. Growth in personal holiness was encouraged in the context of community devotion and worship. He provided spiritual disciplines for those who set out as pilgrims on the journey of faith, hope and love.

A mind strangely opened

For Wesley the New Creation involved heart and soul and mind. He took seriously St. Paul's teaching: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds..." (Romans 12:2) Faith gave birth to new attitudes, new priorities and the vision of the Kingdom of God gave structure to actions. He prepared numerous pamphlets and booklets that were designed to help new disciples become familiar with the foundations of Christian faith. He especially devoted himself to the education of those who accepted the call to become lay preachers in the movement.

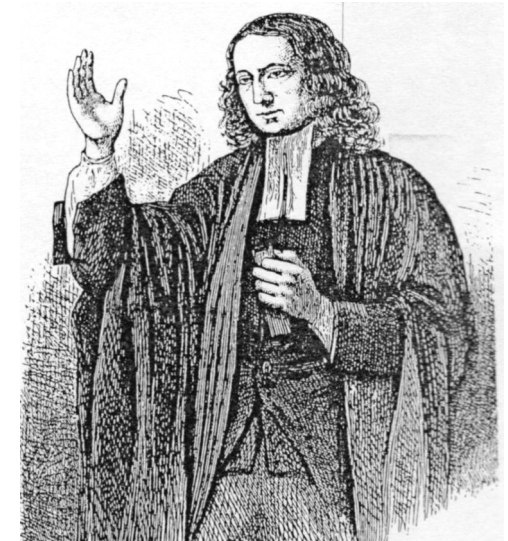
The mystery of what Wesley was experiencing in heart and soul, was matched by what was happening in his mind. Deeply committed to his Anglican heritage, he also valued elements of Puritan theology with its emphasis on the Word of God. But he had a lively openness to other traditions. From his encounter with the Moravians he came to appreciate the centrality of justification by faith. From Roman Catholicism he drew on the mystics in their writing on sanctification. He also felt free to appropriate dimensions of Eastern Orthodox thought that saw perfection as a process assisted by "the energy of divine love."

Heart and soul and mind

There are attractive unities in Wesley's thought. There is a wholeness to Wesleyan spirituality. The warm heart, the awakened soul and the open mind are not opposed to each other, Heart and soul and mind are held together. Each is caught up in the dynamic of the Spirit's action. Inner devotion stimulates moral action. Change begun in the heart finds expression in sharing the Good News and addressing social injustice such as slavery. Faith and works are seen as complementary: faith expressed its vitality in service. To the skeptic of Wesley's day, the Spirit's dynamic in transforming heart and soul and mind must have appeared strange. It remains strange to secular society. Methodists today have much to receive by engaging with this strange yet empowering and transforming tradition.

Methodist Church of New Zealand  
Te Hahi Weteriana O Aotearoa

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"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Matthew 22:37-39

Wesleyan Spirituality Series #1

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