

# The Renewal of Methodism's

## Doctrinal Distinctives

Delbert R. Rose

One hundred years ago this January *American Methodism* launched a denomination-wide celebration of her first century of progress. In the city in which American Methodism's first organized congregation appeared<sup>1</sup>—New York City—the chairman of the “Central Centenary Committee of Arrangements and Correspondence,” Dr. John M'Clintock, gave a memorable keynote address, portions of which have often been quoted by Methodists over the past century. From the pulpit of St. Paul's Methodist Church on January 25, 1866, Dr. M'Clintock<sup>2</sup> gave a ringing challenge to his audience as they faced afresh the message and mission of historic Methodism.

. . . Methodism. . . takes the old theology of the Christian Church, but it takes one element which no other Christian Church has dared to put forward as a prominent feature of theology. In ours it is the very point from which we view all theology. . . . Knowing exactly what I say and taking the full responsibility for it, I repeat, we are the only church in history from the apostles' time until now that has put forward as its very elemental thought—the great central pervading idea of the whole book of God from beginning to the end—the holiness of the human soul, heart, mind, and will. Go through all the confessions of all the churches; you will find this in no other. You will find even some of them that blame us in their books

- 
1. Opinions vary as to the founder of American Methodism's first organized congregation. Was it Philip Embury in New York City in 1776? (See: Robert H. Dolliver, *The Story of Old John Street Methodist Episcopal Church, 1766-1935* New York: John Felsberg, Ind., 1935 , p. 26). Or was it Robert Strawbridge in Frederick County, Maryland, sometime before 1766? (See: Annie Maria Barnes, *Scenes in Pioneer Methodism*, Vol. II Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1891 , pp. 67-80).
  2. M'Clintock had been editor of *The Methodist Quarterly Review* from 1848-1856; and until his death in 1870 had labored with Dr. James Strong to produce the *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*. In 1867 he was appointed as the first president of Drew Theological Seminary, Madison, N. J., one of the institutions built as a result of centennial gifts to Methodism.

and writings. It may be called fanaticism, but dear friends, that is our mission. If we keep to that, the next century is ours; if we keep to that, the triumphs of the next century shall throw those that are past far in the shade. Our work is a moral work—that is to say, the work of making men holy. Our preaching is to that, our church agencies are for that, our schools, colleges, universities, and our theological seminaries are for that. There is our mission—there is our glory—there is our power and there shall be the ground of our triumph. God keep us true.<sup>3</sup>

Early American Methodism had made it crystal clear by 1866 that her theology was summed up in her *Discipline's* "Twenty-Five Articles of Religion," John Wesley's "Fifty-Two Sermons," and his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. They also pointed to the writings of John Fletcher, Adam Clarke, and Richard Watson as the foremost expositors of the Wesleyan understanding of the Christian faith. Several had come to recognize that Methodism's "Articles of Religion" had omitted four important doctrines which were clearly emphasized in standard Methodist writings. These omitted doctrines were: (1) the witness of the Spirit; (2) the sanctification of believers; (3) the possibility of falling from grace; and (4) the doctrine of future rewards and punishments.<sup>4</sup>

Methodism's most distinctive contribution to American Christianity, however, lay in the areas of "the witness of the Spirit," and "the sanctification of believers." Around these two teachings have waged some of her most vigorous polemics both within and without her denominational walls.

### THE HOLINESS REVIVAL

In spite of the "general revival" within American churches in the late 1850's and the special "holiness revival" within revived sectors of the churches,<sup>5</sup> there seems to have been a lingering hostility to vigorous promotion of Methodism's holiness teaching.<sup>6</sup>

- 
3. Quoted in Olin A. Curtis, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1905), p. 372.
  4. Rev. P. Douglass Gorrie, *Episcopal Methodism, As It Was, And Is* (Auburn, N. Y.: Derby and Miller, 1852), p. 197.
  5. E. S. Bucke, general editor, *The History of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), II, 608 ff. Cf. Timothy L. Smith, "Historic Waves of Religious Interest in America," *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science* (November, 1960), pp. 13 ff.
  6. Delbert R. Rose, *A Theology of Christian Experience* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1965), p. 50. Cf. Leslie R. Marston, *From Age to Age a Living Witness* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Light and Life

While episcopal voices and church historians were professing that Methodism's doctrinal emphases were unchanged, yet to several observers this claim seemed more like a lip-service for multitudes than a genuine heart-possession accompanied by the Spirit's witness.

To counteract the lukewarmness toward—even where there was no doctrinal drift from—Methodism's most distinctive doctrines, a new camp meeting movement was launched by some Methodists, many of them successful pastors in prominent Methodist pulpits in mid-Atlantic states. A noted Methodist pastor, the Reverend Alfred Cookman, wrote the invitation which was published in various church periodicals.

A general camp-meeting of the friends of holiness, to be held at Vineland, Cumberland County, New Jersey, will commence Wednesday, July 17, and close Friday, 26th instant 1867.

We affectionately invite all, irrespective of denominational ties, interested in the subject of the higher Christian life, to come together and spend a week in God's great temple of nature...the special object of this meeting will be to offer united and continued prayer for the revival of the work of holiness in the churches; to...strengthen the hands of those who feel themselves comparatively isolated in their profession of holiness; to help any who would enter into this rest of faith and love; to realize together a Pentecostal baptism of the Holy Ghost—and all with a view to increased usefulness in the churches of which we are members.

Come, brothers and sisters of the various denominations, and let us, in this forest-meeting, as in other meetings for the promotion of holiness, furnish an illustration of evangelical union, and make common supplication for the descent of the Spirit upon ourselves, the church, the nation, and the world.<sup>7</sup>

Success smiled upon this venture from the very start. More than 10,000 people gathered for some of the camp's major services. While many Methodists called the new camp-meeting movement schismatic in spirit and divisive in effect, yet the promoters of the Vineland meetings were encouraged by the attendance of Methodism's then popular and famous bishop, Matthew Simpson. He brought his family

---

Press, 1960), pp. 134-146. The tensions and church trials in the Genessee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church seem to be definitely related to a growing spiritual apathy concerning Methodism's "holiness theology." Cf. Bucke, *op. cit.*, II, 340.

7. W. McDonald and John E. Searles, *The Life of Rev. John S. Inskip* (Boston: The Christian Witness Co., 1885), p. 190.

to the camp meeting, including his unconverted son Charles. The influences of the camp resulted in Charles' conversion at the public altar. So many others were converted or entirely sanctified that the sponsors became convinced they should attempt a similar venture for the following summer. They knelt on the camp ground "to covenant with God and each other that they would be a part of an aggressive movement to revive and spread across the land the truth of 'scriptural holiness.' "

"On their knees they transacted their business, electing officers and laying future plans. They called themselves 'The National Camp-meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness.' "8

As the National Camp-meeting Association gained support through its successive summer camps at Manheim, Pennsylvania, and Round Lake, New York, its elected officers felt the need for an official publication which would help carry their ministry far beyond the reaches of their summer assemblies. In 1870 the *Advocate of Christian Holiness* appeared, under the editorship and management of the Reverends William McDonald, W. H. Boole, and George Hughes. The sole aim of this new monthly publication was one with that which gave rise to the National Camp-meeting Association. It was the exposition and promotion of the biblical message of Christian purity not only among Methodists but also the devout believers in all denominations.<sup>9</sup> They affirmed they had no new theories to expound, but were adherents of "the teachings of 'the Fathers,' " meaning of course the Fathers of Methodism—and John Wesley in particular.

#### METHODISM'S DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION

In the very first issue of the *Advocate of Christian Holiness* the Reverend C. Munger voiced for its readership what the leaders of the National Camp-meeting Association understood to be Wesley's teaching on sanctification. First, he reminded his readers that "Methodism originated in a heart-struggle for holiness," as John Wesley and others in the "Holy Club" sought that "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).<sup>10</sup> Next, he called attention to Wesley's discovery in 1738 that justification and regeneration are distinct from full sanctification, and that the former must precede in Christian experience the realization of the latter.

---

8. Delbert R. Rose, "Evangelism," *Christian Life* (April, 1965), p. 42.

9. J. S. Inskip, "To the Friends of Christian Holiness," *Advocate of Christian Holiness*, Vol. I, No. 1 (July, 1870), pp. 3-4.

10. C. Munger, "Holiness and Methodism," *ibid.*, p. 8.

Full sanctification or "Christian holiness" which was distinctive in Wesley's teaching was frequently referred to by him in the following terms: a "second gift" (*Works*, VI, 499),<sup>11</sup> a "second change," (*Ibid.*, VII, 71), the "second blessing" (*Ibid.*, IV, 152), the "secondrest" (*Ibid.*, IV, 499), "full salvation" (*Ibid.*, VII, 377), "higher salvation" (*Ibid.*, VI, 502), and "full redemption" (*Ibid.*, IV, 177). Still other phrases became standard with Wesley in distinguishing between free justification and full sanctification, namely, "entire deliverance from sin," "saved from all sin" and "perfected in love" (*Ibid.*, VII, 71), "cleansed from all unrighteousness" (*Ibid.*, IV, 126), and "saved from all inward as well as outward sin" (*Ibid.*, III, 79).

In 1759 such an unusual revival of holiness broke out in the Methodist Societies that the Wesleys labeled it "the Pentecost of Methodism." Four years later, as Wesley reviewed this remarkable moving of the Holy Spirit, he declared:

During the whole time, many have been convinced of sin, many justified, and many backsliders healed. But the peculiar work of this season has been what St. Paul calls "the perfecting of the saints." Many persons . . . have experienced so deep and universal a change, as it had not before entered into their hearts to conceive. After a deep conviction of inbred sin, of their total fall from God, they have been so filled with faith and love (and generally in a moment), that sin vanished, and they found from that time no pride, anger, or unbelief. They could rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks! (*Ibid.*, IV, 165).

Wesley's mature judgment concerning the importance of his doctrinal interpretation of Christian experience and its propagation was well expressed in these words:

Therefore, all our preachers should make a point of preaching perfection to believers constantly, strongly, and explicitly; and all believers should mind this one thing, and constantly agonize for it (*Ibid.*, VI, 529).

One of the basic reasons for strongly and explicitly preaching "Christian perfection," affirmed Wesley, was that "there is seldom any remarkable blessing from God, and consequently little addition to the society and little life in the members" where it is neglected. "Till you press believers to expect full salvation *now*, you must not look for any revival" (*Ibid.*, VI, 761).

---

11. John Emory, ed., *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley*, A. M. (First American Complete and Standard Edition New York: Waugh and T. Mason, 1832, 7 Vols.

“THE METHODIST TESTIMONY”

The Father of Methodism had also learned—what many in Methodist circles two centuries this side of Wesley have not learned—that it is possible to speak of the “Methodist testimony” in such general terms and in such an ineffectual manner as to amount to failure in its propagation. Referring to one of the Societies which was dying, Wesley wrote,

Here I found the plain reason why the work of God had gained no ground. . . . The preachers had given up the Methodist testimony. Either they did not speak of perfection at all (the peculiar doctrine committed to our trust), or they spoke of it only in general terms, without urging believers “to go on unto perfection,” and to expect it every moment. And whenever this is not earnestly done, the work of God does not prosper (*Ibid.*, IV, 459).

On November 26, 1790—within a few months of his death—Wesley wrote to Dr. Adam Clarke and urged that

if we can prove that any of our local preachers or leaders, either directly or indirectly, speak against it perfect love, let him be a local preacher or leader no longer. I doubt whether he should continue in the society. Because he that could speak thus in our congregations cannot be an honest man (*Ibid.*, VII, 206).

Convinced that Wesley was both scriptural and spiritually sound in his teachings and counsel, the founders of the “National Camp-meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness” (called today the “National Holiness Association”) set themselves to implement the declaration of Dr. M’Clintock on January 25, 1866,<sup>12</sup> and to rekindle on the altars of American Methodism the fires of historic Wesleyanism. Through “holiness publications,” summer camp meetings, church revivals and fellowship meetings these early revivalists of the holiness ideal sought, as “loyal Methodists,” to carry on their sense of mission.

For nearly two decades after the Vineland meetings the holiness revival swept through American Methodism and on to Canada, Great Britain, India and Australia.<sup>13</sup> But all was not moving in the direction of a Wesleyan triumph. Opposition was developing from without and within Methodism, not only to Wesleyan perfectionism but also

---

12. *Supra*, p. 40.

13. Timothy L. Smith, *Called Unto Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1962), pp. 15-21; and Rose, *A Theology of Christian Experience*, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-67.

to the historic understanding of evangelical Christianity.<sup>14</sup> The scholarly Daniel Steele, the first president of Syracuse University (1871) and later professor of New Testament Greek and Systematic Theology at Boston University's School of Theology,<sup>15</sup> singled out the following as the areas attacked by non-Wesleyan thinkers:

The Wesleyan doctrine of evangelical perfection is assailed at three special points—its entirety, its instantaneousness, and its certification. These are so related that they stand or fall together.... While our theologians differ on minor points, there is a complete unanimity as to the possibility of instant and entire purification in this life, in answer to a faith fully developed and adequate.<sup>16</sup>

As a substitute for the Wesleyan emphasis upon the entirety and instantaneity of full sanctification, the following views were most commonly encountered: (1) believers become holy by imputation; that is, Christ's holiness is so laid to their account that it is a substitute for believers being made holy; (2) the new birth and perfected holiness are identical; (3) gradual sanctification, or an insensible approach to full sanctification—with the latter never consciously experienced in this life—is all believers can expect; and (4) full sanctification extends to the measure of one's light; it is an experience that must be repeated over and over again with one's increasing knowledge; inherited depravity however is only entirely washed away at the glorification of soul and body.<sup>17</sup>

Those Methodists whose writings favored some one or some phase of the above views, but which opposed the historically-held Wesleyan position, were: Wilbur F. Tillett, Borden P. Bowne, D.W. C. Huntingron, J. T. Crane, and James Mudge.<sup>18</sup> The latter's book, *Growth in Holiness Toward Perfection*, was the volume which triggered Daniel Steele's response in writing *A Defense of Christian Perfection*—a volume upholding the view of Wesley's teaching as understood by the promoters of the National Camp-meeting Association.

While many of the non-Wesleyan views gradually took root in several academic and ecclesiastical circles of Methodism, there

14. *History of American Methodism, op. cit.*, pp. 385-390; 592-607.

15. Smith, *Called Unto Holiness, op. cit.*, p. 19.

16. Daniel Steele, *A Defense of Christian Perfection* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1896), p. 112.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

18. John Leland Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), pp. 166-180.

were some high officials whose voice and pen continued to proclaim and support the historically-understood interpretations Methodism's most distinctive doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

### THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

Wesley's sermon entitled "The Witness of the Spirit" has been rated by students of Wesleyana as "one of the most important of the Standard Sermons."<sup>20</sup> No other evangelical movement seems to have equalled historic Methodism's witness to this privilege in Christian experience for every believer. John Lawson is convinced that "'The Witness of the Spirit' is for Wesley really a theological name for 'the heart strangely warmed.'"<sup>21</sup>

.. when God gives the Witness He does not reveal a new truth. He raises the temperature of truths already known, so that the believer radiates joy, peace, and convincing speech. To teach that the Spirit of God witnesses a Full Assurance of Salvation is a precise and emphatic way of saying that God's gift of faith is not only a train of ideas in the head and an inclination of the will. It is also a powerful impulse of the heart.<sup>22</sup>

When seeking to define what he meant by the testimony of God's Spirit to the children of God, Wesley had admitted the inadequacy of human language to explain "the deep things of God," or to express in words what the child of God experiences when he receives the Witness.

...the testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.<sup>23</sup>

Holding that Paul taught a twofold witness, Wesley stressed both in his sermons. The witness of the Divine Spirit is direct,

19. R. S. Foster, *Christian Purity: or, the Heritage of Faith* (rev. ed., New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1869); Jesse T. Peck, *The Central Idea of Christianity* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1875); and S. M. Merrill, *Aspects of Christian Experience* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1882).
20. John Lawson, *Notes on Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), p. 86. Cf. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Holy Spirit of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 106-107.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
23. John Wesley, "Sermon X.—The Witness of the Spirit," *Sermons on Several Occasions* (New York: Philips & Hunt, n.d.), I, 87.



immediate, primary and fundamental, whereas the witness of our own spirit is indirect, inferential, secondary and confirmatory. Description rather than definition characterized his treatment of this phase of Christian assurance. For him the witness of our own spirit

is a consciousness of our having received. . . the tempers mentioned in the word of God, as belonging to his adopted children; even a loving heart towards God, and towards all mankind. . . a consciousness, that we are inwardly conformed, by the Spirit of God, to the image of his Son, and that we walk before him in justice, mercy, and truth, doing the things which are pleasing in his sight.<sup>24</sup>

#### A SAFEGUARD AGAINST DECEPTION

Even some of Wesley's contemporaries had objected to his doctrine of the "Witness of the Spirit," as being unscriptural, built upon an unwarranted dependence on religious experience. To this Wesley replied that it was *founded upon* Scripture—especially on such passages as Romans 8:16 and Galatians 4:6—but was *confirmed by* experience.<sup>25</sup>

To avoid fanaticisms and delusions stemming from an unwarranted reliance upon the Holy Spirit's witness, Wesley stressed that two precautions were constantly needed: First, that none are ever presumptuously "to rest in any supposed testimony of the Spirit, which is separate from the fruit of it. . . even 'love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, temperance.' " Secondly, that no one is to rest in any supposed "fruit of the Spirit" without the direct witness. "There may be foretastes of joy, of peace, of love, and those not delusive, but really from God, long before. . . the Spirit of God witnesses with our spirits that we have 'redemption in the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins.' " <sup>26</sup>

It was Wesley's settled conviction, nearly thirty years after his Aldersgate experience, that "there is no need that we should evermore be deprived of either the testimony of God's Spirit, or the testimony of our own, the consciousness of our walking in all righ-

24. *Ibid.*

25. John Wesley, "Sermon XI.—The Witness of the Spirit—Discourse II," *ibid.*, 97-100.

26. *Ibid.*, 100. Cf. Harold B. Kuhn, ed., *The Doctrinal Distinctives of Asbury Theological Seminary* (Berne, Ind: The Herald Press, 1963), pp. 60-77.

teousness and true holiness."<sup>27</sup> However, he had lost the "witness" on at least two occasions and had despaired of ever having been a Christian; but these were momentary reactions and not the studied judgment of a thoughtful Christian.<sup>28</sup>

Most careful students of Wesleyana are easily convinced that one of Wesley's distinctives was his stress upon the witness of the Spirit to one's justification by faith. But what about the Holy Spirit's witness to the believer's entire sanctification? We will let Wesley's own words be heard on this moot point.

When you were justified, you had a direct witness that your sins were forgiven: afterward, this witness was frequently intermitted; and yet you did not doubt it. In like manner, you have had a direct witness that you were saved from sin, and this witness is frequently intermitted; and yet even then you do not doubt it. *But I doubt if God withdraws either the one witness or the other without some occasion given on our part* italics added.<sup>29</sup>

In a letter to one of his preachers in 1768, Wesley gives his estimate of the importance of the witness of the Spirit to one's sanctification: "If any deny the witness of sanctification, and occasion disputing in the select society, let him or her meet therein no more."<sup>30</sup>

With the rise of the National Camp-meeting Association there came a renewed emphasis upon the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit, both to one's justification and his sanctification. The Reverend L. R. Dunn, a "builder of almost seventy churches" in Methodism,<sup>31</sup> chose to write a series of articles in the earliest issues of the *Advocate of Christian Holiness* on "The Witness of the Spirit." In an exulting mood he testified:

Oh, this indwelling and witnessing of the Spirit, both in justified and in sanctified souls, is one of the most comforting assurances of God's Word, and one of the most blessed facts in Christian experience!<sup>32</sup>

---

27. *Ibid.*

28. Delbert R. Rose, "What Were the Results of Aldersgate in Wesley's Life and Ministry?" *The Asbury Seminarian*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (Jan. 1964), pp. 26-27. Cf. Kenneth Geiger, compiler, *Further Insights Into Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1963), pp. 231-246.

29. *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) XIII, 48.

30. *Ibid.*, XII, 452.

31. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

32. L. R. Dunn, "The Witness of the Spirit to Our Sanctification," *Advocate of Christian Holiness* (February, 1871), p. 121. Cf. L. R. Dunn, "Entire Sanctification," *The Methodist Quarterly Review* (October, 1867), pp. 568-570.

## CONCLUSION

Since human nature and Christian verities are basically the same in the 1960's as they were in the 1760's, the times seem ripe for a renewal of basic Wesleyan theology and experience. If depth revivalism produced great social reform in the nineteenth century—as Timothy L. Smith so conclusively demonstrates<sup>33</sup>—it may well be that the last hope of constructive social change in this decade lies in the direction of spreading “scriptural holiness over these lands”!

---

33. Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1957), *passim*.