

## THEOLOGICAL EMPATHY AND JOHN WESLEY'S MISSIONAL FIELD PREACHING

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### **Abstract**

John Wesley cited several external reasons for his submission to field-preaching. These external factors include the persuasive requests of George Whitefield, the effectiveness of open-air preaching, and the closed doors of the Anglican Church. These usual suspects have received much attention among Wesley scholars. However, a closer look at Wesley's writings, especially his *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, reveals that internal motivators were at least as much to blame as external ones for driving Wesley to the fields. What initiated and sustained Wesley's field-preaching for fifty-one years, despite the many inconveniences and dangers associated with this homiletic practice? This study seeks to show that Wesley's sanctification, nurtured by his theological understanding of God as love and his empathic affections for neighbor, drove Wesley into the fields. This study concludes with an exploration of the implications of Wesley's theological empathy for the practice and teaching of preaching today.

### **INTRODUCTION**

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Like my wife recounting the labor and delivery of our three children, John Wesley did not hesitate to describe the undesirable characteristics of his homiletic new birth. In his earliest encounters with field-preaching, he described the practice as "strange"<sup>1</sup> and, worse, "vile."<sup>2</sup> Wesley confessed

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, Journal Entry March 29, 1739, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 19, ed. W. Reginald Ward, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 46. Hereafter *Wesley*.

<sup>2</sup> *Wesley*, Journal Entry April 2, 1739, vol. 19, ed. W. Reginald Ward, 46.

twenty years after submitting to the vile practice, “What marvel the devil does not love field-preaching! Neither do I: I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, an handsome pulpit.”<sup>3</sup> More than thirty years into field-preaching, Wesley was still not warmhearted toward the practice. He wrote in his journal, “To this day field-preaching is a cross to me.”<sup>4</sup>

Not only was preaching in the open air undesirable for Wesley throughout his life, it was downright hazardous. In *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Wesley described the hardships:

Can you bear the summer sun to beat upon your naked head? Can you suffer the wintry rain or wind, from whatever quarter it blows? Are you able to stand in the open air without any covering or defense when God casteth abroad his snow like wool, or scattereth his hoar-frost like ashes? And yet these are some of the smallest inconveniences which accompany field-preaching. Far beyond all these, are the contradictions of sinners, the scoffs both of the great vulgar and the small; contempt and reproach of every kind; often more than verbal affronts, stupid, brutal violence, sometimes to the hazard of health, or limbs, or life.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, field-preaching was a homiletic road paved with all sorts of inconveniences and threats for the preacher.

Despite all of this, Wesley preached in the fields for fifty-one years, preaching his first open-air sermon in Bristol, England, on April 2, 1739, at age thirty-five and his last in Winchelsea, England, at age eighty-seven. Wesley admitted that field-preaching was “a thing submitted to, rather than chosen.”<sup>6</sup> This begs the question, why in the name of all that is safe and Anglican did John Wesley submit to the practice of preaching in the open air, outside of the hallowed halls of the church?

## **THE USUAL SUSPECTS: WHITEFIELD, EFFECTIVENESS, AND THE ANGLICAN CHURCH**

Wesley offers several possible reasons why he engaged in the precarious practice of field-preaching. One reason frequently cited for Wesley’s move from the church to the fields is the arm-twisting of his friend George Whitefield. One can easily sense the persuasive flattery of Whitefield, when he wrote to urge Wesley to join him in the fields, “I am but a novice; you are acquainted

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<sup>3</sup> Wesley, Journal Entry June 24, 1759, vol. 21, ed. W. Reginald Ward, 203.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley, Journal Entry September 6, 1772, vol. 22, ed. W. Reginald Ward, 348.

<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 397. Hereafter *Works*.

<sup>6</sup> *Works*, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 178.

with the great things of God. Come, I beseech you; come quickly.”<sup>7</sup> A powerful preacher such as Whitefield could be overwhelmingly convincing. Yet, Wesley proved over and over again that he could resist Whitefield’s irresistible grace when it came to the latter’s Calvinism. Did Whitefield really drive Wesley to the fields?

Wesley was not shy about defending field-preaching due to its soul-saving effect. Thousands of people, most of whom were not welcome in the Anglican Church, came to hear Wesley preach in the fields. Wesley noted, “The converting, as well as convincing, power of God is eminently present with them.”<sup>8</sup> The effectiveness of this “strange” way of preaching is captured by Wesley when he wrote, “I am well assured that I did far more good to my Lincolnshire parishioners by preaching three days on my father’s tomb than I did by preaching three years in his pulpit.”<sup>9</sup>

However, would Wesley engage in a ministry practice simply because it worked, regardless of its compatibility with his theology? While Wesley was a practical theologian, he was not a pragmatist. He endured persecution and closed ministry doors precisely because he did not allow pragmatic conventions to trump his theological convictions. The ministry doors that were closed to him, that made field-preaching a “virtue of necessity,” were closed precisely because of his “unfashionable doctrine,”<sup>10</sup> convictions he would not modify merely to become more effective. Did effectiveness really drive Wesley to the fields?

The most plausible and frequent reason cited by Wesley for his submission to the fields is that the preaching doors of the Anglican Church were, by and large, closed to him because of his “unfashionable doctrine.” Wesley was ordained to preach but was not allowed to preach in most of the Anglican churches. He had to fulfill his call to preach, and the open air was the only way. Did the Anglican Church really drive Wesley to the fields, though?

Wesley cited Whitefield, effectiveness, and closed churches as reasons why he took to the uncomfortable, nontraditional, and dangerous fields. However, Wesley can be somewhat misleading when it comes to himself. Perhaps a dig below the surface will hint at some other possible, and maybe even more influential, reasons why he preached in the field. The often cited reasons above certainly contributed to John Wesley’s venture into field-preaching, but maybe not to the extent with which they are typically credited. Were any of these reasons, in isolation or combination, enough to

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<sup>7</sup> Luke Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), I: 193.

<sup>8</sup> *Wesley*, Journal Entry September 23, 1759, vol. 21, ed. W. Reginald Ward, 230.

<sup>9</sup> *Works*, Letter to John Smith March 25, 1747, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 26, ed. Frank Baker, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 237.

<sup>10</sup> *Wesley*, Sermon 112 “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel,” vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler, 583–584.

drive Wesley to the fields and keep him there for fifty-one years despite the inconveniences and hazards, or was something else the primary motivator for Wesley?

### **ANOTHER POSSIBILITY: THEOLOGICAL EMPATHY**

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What drove Wesley to the fields? The obvious but easily overlooked answer is that he was being sanctified. Whether Wesley knew it or not, he was in the process of being sanctified, perfected in holy love for God and for people. Holy love drove out of Wesley the fear of duty-bound religion and the hardships of field-preaching. As the Holy Spirit infiltrated Wesley in a pronounced way at Aldersgate and beyond, the latter's mind concerning God and his heart regarding the marginalized were being sanctified in love. Put another way, Wesley's understanding of God (theology) overcame his preferences, and his feelings for the poor (empathy) overcame his prejudices. Once his cognitive understanding of God and his effective feelings for the marginalized were transformed, he was willing to change his behavior. Thus, he preached in the fields. This study seeks to show that Wesley's developing theology cultivated in him an empathy that drove him to the fields and kept him there for fifty-one years.

The primary source that supports this work is Wesley's *A Farther Appeal*, which he wrote more than six years into his open-air adventure. In that writing, he makes an extended and strong case for field-preaching.<sup>11</sup> Some of the usual suspects were cited as rationale. However, and this does not get much scholarly press, Wesley mostly emphasized how theology and empathy were among the primary motivators that drove him to the fields.

#### **Theology**

Wesley's growing sense of the nature and mission of God as love comes through loudly and clearly in *A Farther Appeal*. Comparing field-preaching to the wilderness preaching of John the Baptist, Wesley writes, "Yet the Shepherd of souls sought after us into the wilderness . . . ought not we also to seek . . . and to save that which is lost? Behold the amazing love of God to the outcasts of men! His tender condescension to their folly!"<sup>12</sup> According to Wesley, the essential nature and mission of God is love for those who are wandering around aimlessly in the wilderness of life.

The nature of God as holy love drove God toward unusual lengths in mission. Again, Wesley alluded to the wilderness preaching of John, who operated outside of the temple, "Then God was moved to jealousy, and went out of the usual way to save the souls which he had made."<sup>13</sup> John the Baptist was

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<sup>11</sup> *Works*, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 305–309.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

raised up by God to preach in the “fields” to the marginalized poor when the religious establishment lost its focus on saving souls. When religious leaders fail to embody God’s love for the world, especially those who are marginalized, God will find another way—a plan B. Wesley pointed this out for those who contended against field-preaching, “whenever it has pleased God to work any great work upon the earth, even from the earliest times, he has stepped more or less out of the common way.”<sup>14</sup> God’s *modus operandi* is doing whatever it takes, even employing and empowering something as odd and, to some, unlawful as field-preaching to set captives free.

Wesley wrote in one of his letters, shortly after his *A Farther Appeal*, that the effectiveness of field-preaching is “not my motive” but “a deep conviction that this is the will of God.”<sup>15</sup> It is plausible, perhaps probable, that Wesley’s morphing theological conception of God as love was the prime impetus for his submission to field-preaching.

### Empathy

The second impetus, and one that flows naturally out of the first, is empathy. Theology cultivated empathy. Wesley’s conception of God as love led to the cultivation of God’s love in Wesley. In Wesleyan terms, the process of sanctification that Wesley believed and taught was at work in Wesley. Even if he cited external reasons for field-preaching (Whitefield, effectiveness, and the closed Anglican Church), it was the internal invasion of a sanctifying God that nurtured an empathic love in Wesley that drove him to the fields. Maybe when it comes to field-preaching, Wesley could not always explain himself. Although he came close in *A Farther Appeal*, he certainly could not help himself.

Roman Krznaric, a leading expert in empathy studies, notes that recent scientific scholarship argues for humans as *homo empathicus*, “wired for empathy.”<sup>16</sup> He bases this on the work of Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team of neuroscientists from the University of Parma in 1990. Rizzolatti discovered that mirror neurons in the brain give human beings a natural capacity to be empathic, to feel what another feels.<sup>17</sup> Science indirectly confirms that God has made us like himself, with a capacity for empathy. The ability of humans to exhibit empathic love, then, is one of the marks of the *imago dei* in us.

Wesley believed the *imago dei* that marked us at creation can be restored through the process of sanctification here and now. Empathic love is a divine gene within us. It may be dormant, but it is there like a sleeping giant waiting to be awakened by the Holy Spirit through the process of sanctification.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>15</sup> *Works*, Letter to John Smith March 25, 1747, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 26, ed. Frank Baker, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 237.

<sup>16</sup> Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why it Matters and How to Get It* (New York: Perigee, 2014), xiii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

The Holy Spirit restores what we naturally are before the fall. The *imago dei* is restored here and now, not merely there and later. Wesley is a walking, talking, and writing artifact for his theology, his optimism concerning the power of God's grace to make us what he originally created us to be, *homo empathicus*.

Krznaric defines empathy as “the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions.”<sup>18</sup> The biblical word that comes closest to the meaning of empathy is *σπλαγχνίζομαι*, typically translated “compassion.” *σπλαγχνίζομαι* is a deep in the bowels of the body ache one feels because of someone else's suffering. Scripture is full of occasions when Jesus Christ was “filled with compassion”<sup>19</sup> and acted on behalf of the suffering by feeding, healing, or saving. Affection—what one feels—impacts behavior—what one does.

The empathy of Christ came alive in Wesley, evident by his empathic concern for and ministry to the poor, mostly unchurched, of English society. The connection between Wesley's theological understanding of God as holy love and the former's growing empathy for the marginalized to whom he preached in the open air is tight in *A Farther Appeal*. Just after articulating the theology that drove him to the fields, Wesley articulated his empathy for his flock in the fields:

Consider coolly, if it was not highly expedient that something of this kind should be. How expedient, were it only on account of those poor sinners against their own souls who, to all human appearance, were utterly inaccessible every other way! And what numbers of these are still to be found, even in or near our most populous cities! What multitudes of them were, some years since, both in Kingswood and the Fells about Newcastle! who, week after week, spent the Lord's day, either in the ale-house, or in idle diversions, and never troubled themselves about going to church, or to any public worship at all. Now, would you really have desired that these poor wretches should have sinned on until they dropped into hell? Surely you would not. But by what other means was it possible they should have been plucked out of the fire? . . . It is hard to conceive anything else which could have reached them. Had it not been for field-preaching . . . they must have run on in the error of their way, and perished in their blood.<sup>20</sup>

Wesley's theology of love induced his empathic concern for those “poor sinners” and led him to the fields. It should be noted that Wesley did not use the term “poor sinners” pejoratively but empathically. Whenever Wesley

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>19</sup> See Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 20:34; Mark 1:41, 6:34.

<sup>20</sup> *Works*, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 306–307.

uses “sinner,” the tone is laced with concern not condescension. This sentiment was not typical among preachers in Wesley’s day. It is no coincidence that in his first field-preaching adventure, Wesley preached from Luke 4,<sup>21</sup> a text that highlights God’s empathic love for the marginalized. He saw sinners, like Jesus did, as “captives” who need and long to be “set free.”

Once Wesley adjusted his method from the pulpit to the fields, his manner of preaching was transformed, too. His loving concern for the people in the fields impacted what and how Wesley preached. He empathically contextualized his preaching in a variety of ways. Wesley’s most famous preaching practice evidences his empathic contextualization, “I design plain truth for plain people.”<sup>22</sup> It took a fair amount of restraint for an eloquent Oxford don to use colloquial language. Empathy supplied that restraint.

Contemporaries of Wesley picked up on his empathic contextualization. According to Heitzenrater, “The tendency to select topics according to the context and audience, and speak to their needs and at their level, is also supported by the testimony of several observers who indicate that Wesley spoke very directly to his listeners.”<sup>23</sup> One such observer was John Hampson, Wesley’s first biographer. Hampson provides this very helpful description of Wesley’s empathic preaching: “Wesley’s manner was graceful and easy . . . his style neat, simple, perspicuous, and admirably adapted to the capacity of his hearers.”<sup>24</sup>

Wesley taught Methodist preachers to embody empathic contextualization. He advised, “always suit your subject to your audience.”<sup>25</sup> “Because we are to instruct people of the lowest understanding . . . we should use the most common, little, easy word . . . which our language affords.”<sup>26</sup> Vicki Tolar Burton succinctly sums up the uncommon nature of Wesley’s homiletic writing, “Wesley taught speakers to love their listeners . . . a radical notion.”<sup>27</sup>

When compared to the preaching of Whitefield, Wesley’s style notably comes up short in the area of charisma. Nevertheless, what Wesley may have lacked in charisma, he more than made up for in contextualization. He seemed to have a rare ability in his day of adapting his method and manner of preaching to the particular needs of listeners and to put the gospel in a

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<sup>21</sup> Wesley, Journal Entry April 2, 1739, vol. 19, ed. W. Reginald Ward, 46.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, Preface to Sermons, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler, 104.

<sup>23</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, “John Wesley’s Principles and Practice of Preaching,” *Methodist History* 37:2 (January, 1999), 102–103.

<sup>24</sup> John Hampson, *Memoirs of the late Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, vol. 3 (Sunderland, 1791), 158.

<sup>25</sup> Wesley, Minutes of the Methodist Conference, vol. 10, ed. Henry D. Rack, 859.

<sup>26</sup> Wesley, Letter from John Wesley to the Rev. Samuel Furlly on July 15, 1764, vol. 27, ed. Ted A. Campbell, 381.

<sup>27</sup> Vicki Tolar Burton, *Spiritual Literacy in John Wesley’s Methodism: Reading, Writing, and Speaking to Believe* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 31.



contextual container from which they can drink based upon their hopes and hurts, dreams and disappointments.

This study seeks to show the plausibility that Wesley's motivation to preach in the fields was not merely pragmatic but theologically empathic. After Aldersgate, the empathic love of God for humanity, evident in the incarnation of Christ, got under Wesley's skin and into his soul. God's empathy drove God onto the field of human turf. That theology of empathy likely fueled Wesley's actual empathy for the poor unchurched and led to his incarnational "on their turf" approach to preaching. What happened to God happened to Wesley, since "renewal in the image of God entails being drawn into God's likeness."<sup>28</sup> Wesley was being sanctified, and that is a likely reason why he submitted to the "strange," "vile," inconvenient, and dangerous practice of field-preaching for fifty-one years.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE AND**

### **TEACHING OF PREACHING**

Wesley was a practical, though not pragmatic, theologian. He did what he had to do to be effective. He did what worked, but only in as much as it aligned with his theological cognition and empathic affection. Theology and empathy, love of God and neighbor, ruled his practical roost. For Wesley, theology informs practice, and the bridge between the two is empathy. Wesleyan theology induces empathy, which guides practice. An exploration of ways that Wesley's theological empathy can inform the practice and teaching of preaching today is warranted.

One of the current trends in the church is video-venue preaching. A preacher in one context is video recorded or streamed live for a different context. This method is based on the presumption that only the preacher's content matters, but the preaching context does not. In video-venue preaching, listeners are peripheral bystanders not participants who help shape the preaching event. A disembodied preacher cannot empathically contextualize a sermon in the moment the sermon is preached. The argument for video-venue preaching is a pragmatic one. It is easy, effective, and cheap.

Wesley was driven to the fields, though, not by a quest for pragmatic effectiveness but by his theological understanding of an incarnate God who comes onto our turf in the flesh. If Wesley was really a pragmatist and not a theologian, he would likely support the current trend. Perhaps Wesleyan studies have overplayed the pragmatist and downplayed the theologian in Wesley. Who can envision Wesley endorsing video-venue preaching? It

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<sup>28</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, "The Imitatio Christi and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley's Ministry with the Poor," in ed. M. Douglas Meeks, *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 63.



would be easier, based on this study, to imagine him standing up at a general conference and enthusiastically reasoning, “How dare we preachers proclaim a God whose love drove him to come onto our turf in the flesh, if we are not willing to do the same through the ministry of preaching?”

Wesley’s empathic contextualization offers a corrective for another development that has crept into the church over the past generation. Churches that grow large often protect the preacher from the people to whom s/he preaches. After all, “the preacher is simply too busy now for people. We need to give the preacher space for study. Don’t bother the preacher with shepherding needs.” Protecting the preacher from the people who come to hear sermons on Sunday might seem wise initially but in the long-run is problematic. How can the preacher incisively and empathically contextualize the gospel for people s/he does not know well? Loving, empathic connection between preacher and listener is a Wesleyan homiletic. Regardless of congregational size, the preacher is called to be more like an empathic shepherd than a pragmatic executive.

The cultural tendency to idolize style is also confronted by Wesley’s theological empathy. A preponderance of literature in leadership, communication, and business persuades readers to play to their strengths in order to help their organizations most. “Find your strength and style. Make it your lead card. Stay in the lane of your sweet spot at all costs.” This perspective has leaked into the ministry of preaching. Preachers must, no doubt, seek to find their unique, God-designed preaching strengths and develop them. However, preachers in the Wesleyan tradition will resist the ease of allowing our stylistic preferences to outweigh listener needs. If Wesley made too much of his preferential strengths and style, he would not have preached in the fields. The needs of listeners will significantly impact what and how the empathic preacher preaches.

What drove Wesley to the fields can also inform the professor in the classroom. Wesley’s ministry flow from theology to empathy to practice presents a helpful outline for the preaching course. Instead of starting with best practices—“what works”—perhaps the course can, firstly, foster the theological cognition that, secondly, cultivates empathic affection and, thirdly, moves the student toward practices that are faithful to theology and empathy—love for God and neighbor. The beauty of the Wesleyan way is the equal place given to the head, the heart, and the hands. As it is with the Trinity, there is no hierarchy but mutual submission and interrelation between the different human faculties. If curricular design sets a spacious place at the table for theology, empathy, and practice, then the cognitive, affective, and behavioral can form students well in the Wesleyan way.

## **CONCLUSION**

Before “All You Need is Love” was a Beatles song, it was a Wesleyan homiletic. The Beatles got it from us. Empathic love that drives the preacher deep

into the shoes of the listener is a hallmark of Wesleyan preaching. Heitzenrater makes the case that the main content of Methodism was love of God and neighbor. Then he asserts, “The topics for preaching were an extension of the Christian life that the preacher was expected to model.”<sup>29</sup> The one who preaches in the Wesleyan tradition does not just *preach* on “perfect love” but *embodies* “perfect love” in and around the preaching event.

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<sup>29</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, “John Wesley’s Principles and Practice of Preaching,” *Methodist History* 37:2 (January, 1999), 100.