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*Experiencing the Truth of Scripture:
A Perspective from Methodist History*



Robert E. Coleman

*N*ow the great thing is this: we are consecrated and dedicated to God in order that we may thereafter think, speak, meditate, and do nothing except to his glory. For a sacred thing may not be applied to profane uses without marked injury to him.

JOHN CALVIN

*T*he dynamics of the Christian faith centers in experiencing the truth of God's Word. Whether in individuals or mass revival movements, when the Scripture is believed, blessings come; when it is questioned or compromised, decline and ruin follow.

REALITY OF EXPERIENCE

This principle can be seen in operation through the history of the church, but to bring it into focus, I want to look at the origin of the Methodist revival.

It can be said to have begun in the search of John Wesley for personal faith, which climaxed at a small Moravian chapel on May 24, 1738. Notice how the Bible guided his quest. Waking early that morning, he read in his New Testament, "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises; that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Then he opened his Bible again. This time his eyes fell on the verses of Jesus: "Thou are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). All morning these promises kept running through his mind.

In the afternoon he went to the stately St. Paul's Cathedral, where he was especially moved by the choir's singing of Psalm 130: "Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord;

Lord, hear my voice." The final verse seemed to stir the soul: "O Israel, trust in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption."

Those words were still echoing in his mind as he made his way to the little meeting on Aldersgate Street. We are not told how the service progressed, though it is known that the lesson that evening spoke of the transformation resulting from the new birth. As the young clergyman listened, about a quarter before nine, something happened. He explained it this way:

While he was describing the change which 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.¹

Wesley then "testified openly" to all what he "felt" in his heart.² Having witnessed to those present, he went with some friends to tell his good news to his brother Charles, who lay sick in a house nearby. Rushing into his room, John exclaimed, "I believe. I believe!" Then, typifying their unbounded joy, they joined in singing a hymn.

From such heartfelt assurance, Methodism was born. The biblical theology that Wesley had long espoused and preached had come alive; it was no longer a mere orthodox conviction, it was an experience.

SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

What gave authenticity to Wesley's experience was the witness of the Spirit to God's Word in his heart. The Scriptures had become central in his thinking even before his conversion. In fact, they were instrumental in bringing him to know salvation. While at Oxford, with others in the Holy Club, he had resolved to take the Bible as "their whole and sole rule," it being "their one desire and design to be downright Bible-Christians."³

Thereafter, this determination permeated his whole ministry, as is evident from the constant appeal to Scripture in his

writing and preaching. "The Bible is my standard of language as well as sentiment," he said.⁴ Indeed, it was "the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion."⁵ Endeavoring to be "a man of one book. Yes, I am a Bible bigot," he asserted. "I follow it in all things, both great and small."⁶

His practice was the reflection of a conviction that the Bible was fully inspired by God. Biblical passages were often referred to as the very words of the Holy Spirit.⁷ Therefore, according to Wesley, "nothing which is written therein can be censured or rejected."⁸ He believed that the Bible was inerrant, "infallibly true,"⁹—"the Word of God which remaineth forever."¹⁰ "If there be one falsehood in that book," he wrote, "it did not come from the God of truth."¹¹

Out of this confidence came his commitment to the doctrines of historic evangelical Christianity. Though he did not draw up a lengthy creedal statement like the more traditional churches, he did take from his Anglican heritage a simple confession of faith in his "Articles of Religion." This with his forty-four standard sermons and *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, constituted the Methodist "standards" of doctrine.¹²

To be sure, the catholic Spirit of Wesley cut across all sectarianism and bigotry. But there was no toleration of heresy. Methodist preachers were carefully examined in the doctrines of the church before being sent out to preach. The model deed to Methodist properties stipulated that the premises could be used for worship only as long as the doctrinal standards were faithfully observed.

THE CHALLENGE OF TODAY

The Wesleyan movement flowed out of this kind of theological stamina. It was a marriage of scriptural authority and Christian experience that produced an evangelical awakening which swept over England, spreading to America and birthing a great church.

Borne along with a passion for evangelism, the Methodists soon grew to become the largest denomination in the land, outnumbering the Baptists, their nearest rival, by 20%, and

numbering as many members as all Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians combined. Astounding! About fifty years from the time the first Methodists set foot on these shores, more than a quarter of all professing Christians in America, Protestant or Catholic, belonged to the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹³ Had the rate of increase continued for a few more generations every man, woman and child on the continent would have been won to Christ and called a Methodist.

How do you account for such phenomenal growth? Surely many factors entered into it, but running through them all was the dynamic of people genuinely experiencing the truth of Holy Scripture.

As the years lengthened, however, the momentum subsided, and by the turn of the twentieth century decline of church vitality was painfully evident, a trend that has drastically accelerated in recent years. Higher critical humanistic views of Scripture have generally undermined the earlier confidence in the inerrant Bible; liberal theological agendas have gained ascendancy in church conferences and publications; permissive pluralistic, libertarian attitudes now give little room for Christian discipline and holiness; well orchestrated budget drives and building programs have largely replaced the once dominant zeal for evangelism and world missions.

Not surprisingly, many heart broken Methodists have left the church to enrich other ministries. The loss of more than 2,000,000 members in the past two decades is the greatest loss in so short a period ever sustained by an American denomination. And though some leaders have expressed alarm and called for renewal, by and large the cancer of theological apostasy that eats at the vitals of evangelical truth is not being addressed, least of all in United Methodist colleges and seminaries.¹⁴

It is not easy to keep Christian experience in line with Scripture. The difficulty may be more pronounced with those coming from an Arminian theology which emphasizes individual freedom of the will.¹⁵ For this reason Methodists must be especially careful not to stray from their heritage of faith in an absolutely truthful Bible. While the danger may not be as

obvious within the Reformed tradition, the temptation to take liberty with Scripture is no less real.

Finally, the issue is not one of doctrine, but of commitment. Whatever our theological stance, the natural tendency of human nature is to take the course of least resistance. To exercise faith in the promises of grace requires complete obedience to the Word of God. The world, the flesh and the devil will always seek to impugn, or, at least, belittle the demands of Scripture.

Thankfully, though, we do not have to be intimidated. The Spirit of truth who inspired the Word will prove its validity in the experience of every person who will trust him. The Bible was not written just to give us information; it was written to change our lives. This is the challenge of Scripture—to actually take to heart its transforming power. Experience does not ever replace the authority of God's Word, but it does make it come alive. This is the dynamic of spiritual revival, and, oh, how much we need it today.

Merely giving intellectual ascent to the Scripture is not enough. Indeed, this is the danger of a correct theology without experiencing the truth. Such subterfuge can breed smug complacency and leads to hypocrisy, like that of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Nothing is dead, or more disdained by the watching world, than lifeless orthodoxy.

So let us seek in humility, by the Spirit of grace, to hold together the two so easily divided: biblical authority and Christian experience. In their unity are the beauty and the power of redemptive truth.

Author

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Notes

1. John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, Nehemiah Cunnock, editor, 8 volumes (London: Epworth, 1909), 1:475-76.
2. *The Journal*, 1:477.
3. John Wesley, *A Short History of Methodism, The Works of John Wesley*, Thomas Jackson, editor, 14 volumes (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 8:348. In his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 9:367, he mentions the year 1729 as the time when the Bible became for him "the only standard of truth."
4. John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, John Telford, editor, 8 volumes (London: Epworth, 1931), 5:316.
5. John Wesley, *Works*, 8:349; cf. *Works*, 7:198.
6. John Wesley, *Journal*, 5:169.
7. Examples are Wesley's Comments on John 19:24; 1 Corinthians 2:13; and Galatians 3:8 in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (New York: Lane & Tippett, 1847), 269, 412, 478.
8. *Explanatory Notes*, on John 10:35, 245.
9. John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, Edward H. Sugden, editor, 2 volumes (London: Epworth, 1918), 1:249-50.
10. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, Preface, Apr. 10.
11. John Wesley, *Journal*, 6:117. In the same notation on August 24, 1776, he refutes the notion of a Soame Jehyn that the writers of the Bible could have made some mistakes.
12. When the Constitution of the Methodist Episcopal Church was established at the General Conference of 1808, the first Restrictive Rule of the Constitution "prohibited any change, alteration, or addition" to these standards. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 1988, 54.
13. The percentage of Methodist Christians to the total church population in America continued at about this same ratio until near the end of the nineteenth century, though the evangelistic momentum of the church began to decline several decades earlier. For extensive documentation see Robert E. Coleman, *Nothing to Do But to Save Souls* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Frances Asbury Press/Zondervan, 1990), 23.
14. Methodism followed in the Arminian theological tradition, though it was more aggressively evangelistic in spirit and practical in its application. Wilbur F. Tillett expressed it well when he said: "The theology of Wesley and his followers in the Arminianism of Holland baptized with the Holy Ghost and infused with spiritual life," quoted by Thomas Benjamin Neely, *Doctrinal Standards of Methodism* (New York: Revell, 1918), 127-28.