Biblical Equality and the Spirituality of Early Methodist Women

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The essential role of women in early Methodism

O, blessed fountain of love! Fill my heart more with [Thy] Divine principle. Sink me lower in the depths of humility, and let me sit at the feet of Jesus, and learn of Him. Enlarge my soul, that I may better contemplate Thy glory. And may I prove myself Thy child, by bearing a resemblance to Thee, my heavenly Father!¹

This prayer of Mary Hanson expresses the power and beauty of Christian spirituality among early Methodist women. Like Mary, most of these women remain unknown, not only to the larger Christian community, but even to contemporary Methodists. Their legacy is amazing. In an effort to introduce you to this neglected treasure and the witness of these women to biblical equality, I want to begin where they would most likely begin: in a narrative fashion. Theirs is a spirituality of biography and story. The equality of women and men in early Methodism begins in the simple fact that both had stories about their lives to tell, and all honored the testimony of their faith.

There is no question whatsoever that women played a major role within the life of the eighteenth-century Wesleyan Revival, both historically and theologically.² The fact of female preponderance in the Methodist network of Societies only serves to illustrate a much larger reality.³ Anecdotal evidence concerning the formative influence of women abounds in journals and diaries and has been preserved in local history. Women were conspicuous as pioneers in the establishment and expansion of Methodism. They founded prayer groups and Societies, and, in their attempts to bear witness to their newly discovered faith, often ventured into arenas that were traditionally confined to men.

The story of Dorothy Fisher illustrates a typical missiological scenario of functional equality. Converted under John Wesley’s preaching in London, Dorothy joined the Methodist Society there in 1779. She introduced Methodism to the village of Great Gonerby in Lincolnshire in 1784 by inviting the itinerant preachers to hold services at her home after her move to the north. Two years later, she purchased a small stone building, which, after renovation, served as a Methodist chapel. Learning of Dorothy’s pioneering work, Sarah Parrot (having been told by God to do so) invited her to help establish a Methodist Society in Lincoln. Discerning that this request was indeed a call from God, Dorothy consented, settled her affairs, moved to Lincoln, procured a suitable residence, and commenced her pioneering labors once again in the Apostle Paul’s fashion. In 1788, in an old lumber room near Gowt’s Bridge, a small Society was formed consisting of four women: Dorothy Fisher, Sarah Parrot, Hannah Calder, and Elizabeth Keyley. Dorothy built yet another chapel with an adjoining residence, all of which was deeded to the Methodist Conference in later years. This story is consistent, in much of its tone and detail, with the many accounts of Methodist origins throughout the British Isles.

An excerpt from the journal of Grace Murray reveals an extensive ministry:

Mr. Wesley fixed me in that part of the work, which he thought proper; and when the House was finished, I was appointed to be the Housekeeper. Soon also, the people were again divided into Bands, or small select Societies; women by themselves, and the men in like manner. I had full a hundred in Classes, whom I met in two separate meetings; and a Band for each day of the week. I likewise visited the Sick and Backsliders. . . . We had also several Societies in the country, which I regularly visited; meeting the women in the daytime, and in the evening the whole society. And oh, what pourings out of the Spirit have I seen at those times!⁴

There is no question that women were preponderant in the movement, functioned as some of its most indefatigable pioneers, and even preached in the network of Methodist Societies that stretched the length and breadth of Britain. A little more than two years after the establishment of the Foundery Society in London, John Wesley drew up the first list of sixty-six leaders. Of this group of formative leaders within nascent Methodism, forty-seven were women. This example from the heart of the early movement is typical of the whole. Early records of the Society in Bristol afford similar evidence with a two-to-one ratio of women to men.⁵ Such female presence and influence begs this question: What led women to this elevated status and made possible the roles that they assumed along side the Methodist men of their day?

Factors that opened doors for women

Certainly, a wealth of factors combined both in the founder and the movement to create a climate conducive to the acceptance and empowerment of women. Three factors, however, seem to have been particularly significant.⁶

The personal influence of John Wesley

Firstly, the elevated status of women within the Wesleyan Revival cannot be understood apart from the person of John Wesley. Much of his appreciation for the place of women in the life of the church can be traced to his formative years in the Epworth rectory. Largely due to the influence of his mother, Susanna, John seldom wavered from this fundamental principle: No one, includ-

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ing a woman, ought to be prohibited from doing God's work in obedience to the inner calling of her conscience. This conviction would later lead him not only to sanction, but also to encourage the controversial practice of women's preaching. John was an outspoken advocate for the rights of women in an era of tremendous social upheaval. Many statements from his sermons and treatises reflect his desire to translate spiritual equality into day-to-day reality in the lives of women.

The liberating environment of the Methodist Society

Secondly, the Methodist Societies, which were ecclesiolae in ecclesia (little churches within the church), functioning as catalysts of renewal inside the established church and composed of still smaller groups known as class and band meetings, provided a liberating environment for women. One of the unique features of early Methodism was its capacity to create its own leadership from within. The early pioneers who were responsible for the initiation of new Societies naturally assumed positions of leadership. The large extent to which women functioned in this sphere was a major factor contributing to the inclusiveness and vitality of the movement. By allowing women to assume important positions of leadership within the structure of the Societies, John Wesley gave concrete expression to the freedom he proclaimed in his preaching. The end result was that individuals who stood impotently on the periphery of British society were empowered and gifted for service in the world. Women, who were otherwise disenfranchised in a world dominated by men, began to develop a new sense of self-esteem and purpose.

The egalitarian impulse of Wesleyan theology and “concern for biblical equality”

While John and Charles Wesley and their followers never used the language of "biblical equality," nor would they have felt compelled to do so, their theology was founded upon an understanding of the New Testament community that bore witness to a radical new vision of life in Christ for all of God's children. This third element—a cohesive and dynamic matrix of biblical and theological principles—merits more thorough exploration because this egalitarian impulse was integral to the spirituality of the early Methodist women. Egalitarianism within the Methodist movement was not unique; rather, it was founded upon certain principles held in common with historic movements of Christian renewal. Included among these were the value of the individual soul, the possibility of direct communion with God, the emphasis on the present activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, the importance placed upon shared Christian experience, the rights of conscience, and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. These views combined to create a theological environment conducive to the empowerment of women.

John Wesley's goal was personal religious experience and its power to transform both individuals and society. His dynamic view of salvation and the Christian life, evoked by a gift of grace, tended to transcend gender and social differences. His stress on charismatic leadership fostered a leveling sentiment among the Methodists. The unity and equality of all believers in Christ became an inherent aspect of the evangelical preaching of Wesleyan itinerants. Not only was faith to be expressed in the works of all, but also individual talents were to be developed as a sacred trust from God. One of the Methodist preachers, William Bramwell, in his own preaching encouraged women to exercise their gifts. He observed in one sermon, "Why are there not more women preachers? Because they are not faithful to their call.” Women interpreted his rebuke as a clarion call to respond in faithfulness, and they received his strong support when they did. These attitudes undercut prevailing stereotypes about the status and role of women in society. Thus, the phenomenon of female leadership was a natural progression, a logical extension of the Wesleyan theology of religious experience.

Given the opportunities, women exercised leadership

The primary training ground for the women was the small group, particularly the band and class meeting leadership. Within this arena, women found the widest range of opportunity. These leaders stood nearest to the rank and file of the movement and, for this reason, occupied a strategic position within the Societies. The primary function of these leaders was to assist their Methodist brothers and sisters in a common quest for holiness. Appointment to such an office was based primarily upon one's ability to empathize with the struggles of the members for whom they cared. Of the other offices in which women functioned as pioneers, the most important include those of housekeepers, visitors of the sick, preachers' wives, and local and traveling preachers.

Of much greater significance than might be inferred from the title, housekeeper was an office within the Methodist institutional structure which entailed serious managerial and spiritual responsibilities. Not only were the housekeepers responsible for the general wellbeing of guests and residents in major centers of Methodist influence across Britain, often known as "houses," but they also supervised the practices of the community related to spiritual formation and Christian discipleship. They offered Bible studies, led in worship, and organized the prayer life of these potent spiritual communities. Sarah Ryan was one of the earliest housekeepers and viewed her provision of hospitality and the maintenance of order within her appointed "family" to be serious aspects of her Christian vocation and spirituality. Another office in which the early Methodist women excelled was that of visitor of the sick. John Wesley first developed this office in London in 1741, describing this important role in his Plain Account of the People Called Methodists: "It is the business of aVisitor of the sick, to see every sick person within his district thrice a week. To inquire into the state of their souls, and to advise them as occa-
John also approved and promoted the preaching ministry of women in his evolving movement. He had come to the affirmation of women preachers over time, and not without some personal struggle; but, once he was convinced that God was working through a whole host of women called to preach, he embraced their work on behalf of his movement wholeheartedly. A number of these women were key players in the amazing drama of female liberation and promotion. Primary among them are Sarah Crosby, the first authorized woman preacher; Margaret Davidson, blind evangelist and first woman preacher in Ireland; Hannah Harrison; Elizabeth Hurrell; Sarah Mallet; Dorothy Ripley; Mary Stokes; and Mary Taft, greatest female evangelist of the nineteenth century, among others. Whether a member of this illustrious band or a simple class leader in a local Society, in the multiplicity of the offices they assumed, early Methodist women functioned as coworkers, pastors, and partners in God’s renewal of the church. They felt free to express themselves and exercise their gifts. They led the Methodist family in their simple acts of worship and service. They were the glue that held Wesleyanism together on the most practical levels of its existence. Men and women functioned as equals in the life of the movement, and this egalitarianism was built upon a solid biblical foundation.

John Wesley’s analysis of Matthew 25:36, “I was sick and you visited me,” elicited one of his most radical statements, not only of creation as well: “If I did not believe so, I would not act in an extraordinary manner.—I praise my God, I feel him very near, calls, she retorts: “If I did not believe so, I would not act in an extraordinary impulse of the Spirit.” He viewed these more “radical activities” as exceptions to the general rule; but, over time, as more and more exceptions arose, the preaching ministry of women became a de facto rule, and no longer an exception, within the life of the Methodist Societies.

The first to press the full equality of women in the preaching ministry of the church energetically was Mary Bosanquet. During the summer of 1771, in a letter to John Wesley, she developed a lengthy defense of the practice, similar to the classic statement of Margaret Fell in *Womens Speaking Justified.* She carefully considers the classic “prohibitions” and addresses six objections. Her first conclusion is that the so-called prohibitive passages refer to specific situations in which certain women were meddling with church discipline and do not apply, therefore, to women in general or preaching in particular. She points to the internal contradiction in Paul’s own statements, barring women from speaking at one point and admonishing them to cover their heads while prophesying at another (1 Cor. 11:5). Limiting the speaking of women to times of “peculiar impulse” places too severe a limitation, she believes, on the gracious activity of God. She rejects the notion that women’s preaching is “immodest,” pointing to the examples of Mary, the woman of Samaria, the wise woman of 2 Samuel 20:16–22, and Deborah, all of whom were characterized by purity and humility, yet publicly declared the message of the Lord. To the claim that all these instances were extraordinary calls, she retorts: “If I did not believe so, I would not act in an extraordinary manner.—I praise my God, I feel him very near, and I prove his faithfulness every day.” As a consequence, John Wesley not only permitted such activities among the women, but encouraged them more and more.

**Characteristics of Wesleyan theology**

Commitment to these biblical egalitarian principles shaped the spirituality of the early Methodist people. Before we turn to several distinctive characteristics related to the spirituality of early Methodist women, readers might be helped if we survey some of the common, salient themes of Wesleyan spirituality; namely, the foundation of grace, spiritual autobiography and the narrative of liberation, accountable discipleship and the communal nature of spirituality, works of piety (including prayer and fasting, immersion in Scripture, worship, and Eucharist), and works of mercy.

**The foundation of grace**

Christian discipleship—the arena of God’s continuing activity in the life of the believer—is, first and foremost, a grace-filled
response to God’s all-sufficient grace. Since God’s grace is available to all, it privileges none more than others. Grace, as it was experienced and understood among the Methodists, exerted a profound and universal leveling influence. All are equal in God’s eyes because God’s grace is extended to all.¹⁶

**Spiritual autobiography and the narrative of spiritual liberation**

John Wesley believed that all Christian faith is autobiographical.¹⁷ Everyone, no one excluded, has a story to tell, and central to the narrative of the early Methodists was the experience of conversion—a process involving a call to personal repentance, moral transformation, and concomitant freedom to love. Not only was this experience possible for both women and men alike, but it also was viewed as essential. The decisive conclusion to be drawn from the accounts of women in particular, however, is that salvation essentially meant liberation. This newfound freedom, more often than not, was rooted in the concept of “new creation,” and this experienced liberation challenged all forms of bondage and discrimination.

**Accountable discipleship and the communal nature of spirituality**

Intimate circles of married and single women, the Wesleyan band meetings under the leadership of women, were the primary locus of spiritual accountability. Characterized by close fellowship and stricter obligations, the bands were potent in the empowerment of women and the development of their spiritual gifts. The primary purpose of these bands was intense personal introspection coupled with rigorous mutual confession for those who were “pressing on to perfection.”¹⁸ In these intimate groups, friendship and fellowship emerged as critical aspects of a developing Wesleyan spirituality. The Christian fellowship and intimacy provided through the class and band meetings, for the women in particular, were a potent means of grace. In the intimacy of these small groups, and particularly the bands, women learned, and were given equal opportunity, to grow in Christ. Together, they plumbed the depths of God’s love for them all.

**Works of piety**

The “means of grace,” namely, prayer and fasting. Bible study, Christian fellowship, and participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion, not only nurtured and sustained their growth in grace, but also provided the energy that fueled the Wesleyan movement as a powerful religious awakening.¹⁹ No means of grace was as important to the Wesleys or the women as the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The early Methodists sang, and the women bore witness, to the testimony of the hymn:

The prayer, the fast, the word conveys,
When mix’d with faith, Thy life to me;
In all the channels of Thy grace
I still have fellowship with Thee:
But chiefly here my soul is fed
With fulness of immortal bread.²⁰

These “feasts of love,” as the women often described them, shaped their understanding of God’s love for them and their reciprocal love for God, all powerfully symbolized for them in the sharing of a meal.

**Works of mercy**

Those who encountered the good news of the gospel and were subsequently drawn into Christian communities of love were also propelled into the world with a mission of witness and service. Again, none was excluded from this categorical imperative.

Wesleyan spirituality always demonstrates an essential concern for social justice and mission rooted in evangelical faith. The women of early Methodism were people of vision, and the image of the church they lived out was one of active social service, commitment to the poor, and advocacy for the spiritually, politically, and socially oppressed. For the women, there could be no separation of their personal experience of God in Christ from their active role as agents of reconciliation and social transformation in the world. Their autobiographical portraits are bold images of people living in and for God’s vision of shalom (peace, wholeness). The women had learned from the Wesleys that authentic Christianity is mission, and sincere engagement in God’s mission is true religion. The center of this missiological calling and identity, moreover, was simply their desire to share the good news they had experienced in Christ with others. In other words, in their view, the heart of mission was evangelism.

**Implications for women**

Methodist women, therefore, sought out people in need—the poor, the hungry, the destitute, and the neglected. They preached the Word, visited prisons, established orphanages and schools, and practiced their servant-oriented faith as devoted mothers who discerned the presence of God in the most menial of chores. Hardly passive Christians for whom ministry was performed, these women were active, ministering servants who cared for one another and extended their ministry into the communities they served. The advice of John Wesley to a Methodist woman aspiring to “perfection” is a typical expression of this gospel alongside the poor: “Go and see the poor and sick in their own little hovels. Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off the gentlewoman: You bear a higher character.”²¹

In her preface to the life of Elizabeth Mortimer, Agnes Bulmer claims that the central thrust of early Methodist women’s lives was “a renovated spirit, and a holy life.”²² She provides a simple definition of “spirituality” that helps frame the distinctive features of the spirituality lived out by women like the subject of her biography. Spirituality involves every aspect of life, she maintains, that demonstrates “there is a real, a delightful, a transforming intercourse to which the human spirit is admitted with the ever-blessed God.”²³ In addition to the various aspects of spirituality
held in common with many of the early Methodist men, the spirituality of early Methodist women is distinctive in its revolution around pathos (mystery in life), beauty (majesty in life), and love (miracle in life). The egalitarian impulse of the Wesleyan movement made it possible for the women to develop a spirituality that was real, blessed, and loving. Rather than being compelled to conform to a preconceived masculine mold, they were able to embrace their own unique giftedness as women within the life of the movement.

A spirituality of pathos—the mystery in life

Early Methodist women were masters at practicing the presence of God. They managed to find God in the common round of daily life. Because of this, their writings reflect a healthy realism grounded in the ordinary tragedies and triumphs of real life. In her manuscript journal, Mary Entwisle reflects upon the death of her son. Her meditations are filled with pathos. She struggles. She expresses her anger. She lives in despair, but hope eventually breaks through. One line out of her extended narrative relating to the birth of a child under extremely harrowing circumstances speaks volumes with regard to the experience of women and the nature of their spirituality: “[God] made me the living mother of a living child.”

A spirituality of beauty—the majestic in life

These amazing women were quick to make connections between life in the Spirit and the wonders of creation. Not so much a “creation-centered” spirituality, theirs was an aesthetic spirituality that valued beauty in all its variety. Mary Hanson writes in a letter to a friend:

My garden begins to demand my renewed labours. When will you inhale the fragrance of my roses, and help me to admire the kindness of our God in providing so much innocent pleasure for the delight of the senses? The study of nature is still my favourite recreation; but to increase in the love and knowledge of God almost swallows up every other desire.

She writes in her journal:

How delightful is the contemplation of the works of God! My enraptured eye runs over the productions of the earth with a curiosity and interest that never leave me. The passing clouds, the opening flowers, the sweet river, whose constant changes give a variety to the scenes. How successively do these steal on my imagination, and oft-times how inexpressible is my gratitude for receiving from the hands of God so many outward blessings.

A spirituality of love—the miracle in life

The language of spirituality that is more pervasive than any other in the writings of the early Methodist women is related to their overwhelming sense of God’s presence. It is the language of the heart filled with love. Linked directly in the Methodist mind to holiness, the image of God’s presence often carries with it the overtones of humility, purification, and the miraculous wonder of in-filling love. Here is a spirituality of love. Holiness equals love; love equals holiness, and all is miracle as the faithful live out their lives on the foundation of God’s grace. Mary Fletcher expresses it well in these words of admonition to her fellow disciples in Christ:

O that you would therefore do as Jacob did, be earnest with the Lord, that his love may fill your heart, as the Scripture expresses it, the love of God, shed abroad in your hearts by the Holy Ghost, given unto you. If you get your hearts full of the love of God, you will find that is the oil by which the lamp of faith will be ever kept burning. . . . Pray, my friends, pray much for this love; and remember that word, “He that dwell-eth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him!”

Conclusion

In the Wesleyan tradition, a disciple with a living faith is the one whose whole heart has been renewed, who longs to radiate the whole image of God in his or her life, and therefore hears the cry of the poor, and wills, with God, that all should truly live! Those who are truly servants of Christ in the world empty themselves of all but love and find their greatest reward in the realization of God’s dream of shalom for all. This is the living legacy of the early Methodist women for us today. The “Hymn, In Honour of Jesus,” by the blind Irish preacher Margaret Davidson, is an amazing vision of the final triumph of God’s love in the world. It is also a fitting conclusion to this discussion of the spirituality of early Methodist women—a life lived, a ministry engaged, in equal partnership with all of God’s children:

Constrain’d by energy divine
To call my Jesus ever mine,
I languish to be all like thee,
Till lost in thy immensity:
Struggling into thy dear breast,
Lord, I enter,
And there center,
Happy in thy glorious rest.

I wait till wafted up to thee,
O thou mysterious One in Three
By love’s incircling arms caress’d,
And with a view of glory blest,
Now I Abba, Father, cry—
The same blessing,
Without ceasing,
Pour on all below the sky.

Then hallelujahs shall we raise
Superior to Angelic lays,
Whilst we adore a bleeding God,
Who bought, and cleans’d us with his blood—
Cast our crown before his feet,
Self-abasing—
Jesus praising—
Lost in transport, endless, sweet. 29

Notes

3. For a full discussion of the evidence related to female initiative in the formation and establishment of Methodist Societies, see Chilcote, Wesley and Women, 49–54.
5. Exclusively female Societies were noteworthy in the early years of the revival and actually elicited some of John Wesley’s antagonists’ most biting criticism concerning the founder and his intentions. There can be no doubt that women wielded tremendous influence during these critical years wherever Methodism was planted and flourished. See Chilcote, Wesley and Women, 60–61.
6. These three themes were first identified in Paul W. Chilcote, “The Empowerment of Women in Early Methodism,” Catalyst 11, no. 2 (January 1985): 1–3.
10. See Chilcote, Wesley and Women, 68, 74–75, 125.
13. For a discussion of early exchanges on these texts, see Chilcote, Wesley and Women, 118–23.
15. In 1778, John Helton, a popular Methodist-preacher-turned-Quaker, wrote an irenic pamphlet in which he sought to demonstrate how Wesley had altered his views on a number of subjects during the previous thirty years (Reasons for Quitting the Methodist Society; Being a Defense of Barclay’s Apology [London: Printed by J. Fry, 1778]). One of the changes he noted was Wesley’s attitude toward women preachers. There can be no doubt that, in his wider acceptance of women as “extraordinary messengers of the gospel,” Wesley acted partly under the influence of the Quakers.
17. I have discussed this important matter in Chilcote, Her Own Story, 14–18.
23. Bulmer, Elizabeth Mortimer, 10.
25. Clarke, Memoirs of Mary Cooper, 87.
27. Elsewhere I have discussed the connection between holiness and happiness in the writings of early Methodist women. Their conception of the Christian life could equally be described as a spirituality of happiness or blessedness. See Paul W. Chilcote, “Sanctification as Lived by Women in Early Methodism,” Methodist History 34, no. 2 (January 1996), 93–95.
28. Quoted in Mary Tooth, A Letter to the Loving and Beloved People of the Parish of Madeley (Shifnal: Printed by A. Edmonds, n.d.), 17–18.
29. Smyth, Margaret Davidson, 162–64; stanzas 3, 4, and 6 of the original hymn.