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**Religion Inward and Outward:  
“Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (IV, V, VI & VIII) as Ascetic Theology.**

Outside of the sphere of Methodism<sup>1</sup> there is a cartoon of John Wesley as an evangelist who preached an enthusiastic heart religion which stood in contrast to the rational deism of his day. The image portrayed is one of a pious sentimentalist suffering from a kind of holiness obsessive-compulsive disorder. Those with such a low view of Wesley’s theology are often bewildered by the irrefutable success of the movement he started. Attempts to explain the success of Wesley’s work as nothing more than good organization or pandering to an anti-intellectual sensibility amongst the poor simply fail. Why have no other people had the same degree of success in their evangelical endeavors when modeling their work on Wesley’s structure? How does one account for the great institutions of higher learning spread across the world that were founded by Methodists if anti-intellectualism were part of the Methodist DNA?

At the other end of the spectrum is a view held by a few within Methodism that Wesley was the theologian’s theologian and his work is treated with almost as much reverence as Holy Scripture. Given the lack of a work of systematic theology such as Barth’s *Dogmatics* or Calvin’s *Institutes*, it is difficult to defend this view of Wesley in any serious and sustained way. The premise is that systematic theology is the only

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1. In the “sphere of Methodism” I include the Nazarene and Wesleyan denominations as well as the Salvation Army and other groups that claim John Wesley as a spiritual father. Hereafter I’ll simply use “Methodism” in this expansive sense.

form of theology worthy of study. The lack of a Wesleyan *Summa* is problematic for “serious” scholars. Those who hold to Wesley as a great theologian often have to clear this hurdle to even gain entry into the conversation.

Neither of these two images are adequate to the reality of Wesley and his work. Various attempts have been made to present a balanced view of Wesley’s thought while still emphasizing his unique and seminal place in the history of Christianity. Albert Outler, seeking a *via media*, described Wesley as a “folk-theologian.” He intended this to be a way of simultaneously magnifying Wesley’s impressive theological acumen and explaining why the vast majority of Wesley’s work was done for the common people. Outler indicates that Wesley could have been a systematic theologian of the first-order, that he qualifies to be counted “alongside other fruitful ‘doctors of the church’,” but opted instead to write for the common man.<sup>2</sup> Others have tried to achieve the same goals by calling Wesley a practical theologian.<sup>3</sup> We must remember that Wesley was a logician of the first order; he lectured and tutored at Oxford in the field of logic. It has been said that he would rout any opponent in any dispute.<sup>4</sup> The consensus of those who knew Wesley personally and of those who have seriously studied his work is that

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2. Albert C. Outler, “John Wesley: Folk-Theologian,” *Theology Today* 34 (July 1977), 150-160.

3. Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 71-77; of particular note is the quote from Langford on p. 76; Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 16-17; Although the title of the book uses the term “practical theology” It seems clear that Maddox means something more like how I am using ascetic theology. Briefly, the difference between the two is one of the aim. Practical theology is concerned with theology’s application to the present context while ascetic theology is an endeavor to explicate the Christian life.

4. Rex Dale Matthews, “*Religion and Reason Joined*”: A Study in the Theology of John Wesley (Th.D. thesis, Harvard Univ, 1986), 143-144.

he possessed a mind that was astute, clear and powerful. His heart may have been strangely warmed, but that in no way chilled his brain.

The view we have been discussing in this course is that Wesley was not doing systematic theology for the reasons that Outler raised. But, to call it “folk-theology” seems to imply that the “folk” have no need of “real” (i.e., academic) theology.<sup>5</sup> Instead of a kind of simplified systematic theology for the *hoi polloi*, Wesley was doing a full-blooded form of ascetic theology “*ad populum*—to the bulk of mankind.”<sup>6</sup> Rather than writing theology for academic theologians, Wesley was working on the “cure of souls.”<sup>7</sup> As with most things Wesley, one can neither look to one extreme nor the other. He was neither an anti-intellectual preacher nor a theologian locked in an ivory tower writing his *Summa*. Wesley was a hard-nosed lecturer in logic at Oxford and a devout pietist who spent time visiting those in prison. He was a high-church Anglo-catholic who preached at revivals in the open fields. His theology is not anti-intellectual, academic or dumbed down; it is ascetic. The question “Who is God?” is important for Wesley because it helps answer the question “How do I live the Christian life (how do I get holy)?”

With this background information in place, we can now turn to some of the sermons in which Wesley spells out his doctrine of the Christian life. All four sermons under consideration today were written in 1748 and can each be read as part of a larger project. The entire series of discourses on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) contained thirteen sermons. Yet, each sermon is self-contained. Written a full

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5. Maddox, 16.

6. John Wesley, “Preface” Sermons I, 103-104.

7. Matthews, 177.

decade after the pivotal experience at Aldersgate, they draw out the core of the Gospel, explain how we are to respond to that message and show what stands in our way.<sup>8</sup>

In “Discourse IV” using the “salt of the earth” passage as his starting point, he boldly and without any qualifications proclaims that Christianity is a social religion. It is not an inward religion. There is an inward component to Christianity—we are assured of our salvation inwardly through our spiritual senses—but to limit Christianity to this is to wither on the vine. Wesley has no truck with those who would say, “Is it not enough to ‘follow after charity’? To soar upon the wings of love? Will it not suffice to worship God, who is a Spirit with the spirit of our minds?” He calls their position the “fairest of all devices wherewith Satan hath ever perverted the right ways of the Lord!”<sup>9</sup> For Wesley, “Christianity is essentially a social religion and to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it.”<sup>10</sup> To withdraw from the world and not engage it in real works of charity is to deny our calling and baptismal vocation; it would be to hide the light given us in Christ under a bushel basket or in a windowless cloister. As always, Wesley seeks a *via media* in that he acknowledges the need for solitude and rest for the nurturing of our own souls. The question is not of the necessity of solitude but the use of it to the neglect of charity.

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8. Albert Outler in the introductory comments to “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount IV” in Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 193.

9. Outler, *Sermons*, 194-195.

10. Outler, *Sermons*, 195.

In our own time, we see this mentality still at play in the minds of some Pentecostal groups that completely withdraw from the world and refuse to mingle with outsiders. A more prevalent and insidious version of this doctrine is the claim that one can be “spiritual but not religious.” Wesley would claim that to be truly spiritual one must be active in the world, responding to what the spirit gives: “It is your very nature to season whatever is round about you. It is the nature of the divine savor which is in you to spread to whatsoever you touch; to diffuse itself on every side, to all those among whom you are.”<sup>11</sup> By either withdrawing from the world or keeping our own spirituality private, we deny the life giving power of our faith. Once again, Wesley is after a middle ground. Of course, “the root of religion lies in the heart” but, “if this root be really in the heart it cannot but put forth branches.”<sup>12</sup> Against the evangelists who are only interested in saving souls and not tending to the physical needs of people, Wesley has this to say: “Whether they will finally be lost or saved, you are expressly commanded to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. If you can and do not, whatever becomes of them, you shall go away into everlasting fire.”<sup>13</sup> This is not a version of the social gospel. The society itself cannot be healed, only individuals within the society. To bring individuals to healing requires the whole person, body and soul, to be tended to and cared for and that requires that a Christian use his or her whole person to do the tending.

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11. Outler, *Sermons*, 198.

12. Outler, *Sermons*, 201.

13. Outler, *Sermons*, 204.

In “Discourse V,” Wesley demonstrates how the ethical content of the law (as opposed to the ceremonial law) is completely consistent with and necessary for the gospel; “There is no contrariety at all between the law and the gospel; [...] there is no need for the law to pass away in order to the establishing of the gospel. [...] They agree perfectly well together.”<sup>14</sup> Looked at through our lens of ascetic theology, Wesley’s concern is that those under his direction be careful to live the fullness of the Christian life. Given Jesus’ injunction that our righteousness needs to exceed that of the Pharisees, and given that the Pharisees (as evinced by Paul) were externally righteous, what then is missing? In a long passage, Wesley explains that Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees was not that they were hypocrites, but that they trusted in their own ability to be righteous and condemned others for failing—their attitude of moral superiority was their moral failing.<sup>15</sup>

The way in which a Christian is to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees is through attending to the *entirety* of the moral law and by fulfilling the spirit, not simply the letter of the law; “Their righteousness was external only; Christian righteousness is in the inner man. [...] The Pharisee laboured to present God with a good life; the Christian with a holy heart.”<sup>16</sup> This is not in contrast with the focus of the previous sermon but rather the other side of the same point: “Thus to do no harm, to do good,

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14. Outler, *Sermons*, 210.

15. In a great passage on how righteous the Pharisees are, Wesley gives a passage that probably convicts everyone at Perkins, except perhaps Dr. Stamm and Dean Lawrence who have impeccable chapel attendance records. “Do you fast twice in the year? I am afraid some among us cannot plead even this! [...] Do you join in prayer with the great congregation? Daily, if you have opportunity?” (218). Morning prayer here is attended by about 8 people on any given day and the number of students in chapel last Wednesday was dismal.

16. Outler, *Sermons*, 219.

to attend the ordinances of God<sup>17</sup> [...] are all external; whereas, on the contrary, poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger and thirst after righteousness, the love of our neighbor, and purity of heart [...] are all internal.”<sup>18</sup> As we saw in “Discourse IV,” inward and spiritual religion in and of itself is insufficient. Outward and public religion, likewise, is not enough; “What is the exactest form of religion to thee? The most perfect outside righteousness? Go thou higher and deeper than all this. Let thy religion be the religion of the heart.”<sup>19</sup> The religion of the heart is not apart from but instead stands upon the righteousness that is found through the law.

Having set up the necessity of a religion of the heart and righteousness within the law upon which this heart religion rests, Wesley turns to how the two interrelate in “Discourse VI.” The link is “those dispositions of soul which constitute real Christianity.”<sup>20</sup> It is not enough simply to give alms to the poor out of legal responsibility or if the intention is to be seen as better in the eyes of others. Intentionality is very important in Wesley’s understanding of holiness, “If ye seek your own glory, if you have any design to gain the honour that cometh of men, whatever is done with this view is nothing worth.”<sup>21</sup> Simply having a pure and holy intention makes an otherwise indifferent act “holy and good and acceptable to God.”<sup>22</sup> Holy and pure intentions are executed in private. Likewise, prayer (“the lifting up of the heart to God”)<sup>23</sup> should also

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17. Note that these are the general rules of the People Called Methodists, Wesley isn’t saying that they need to be ignored, but that they are only part of the whole nature of the Christian life.

18. Outler, *Sermons*, 220.

19. Outler, *Sermons*, 221.

20. Outler, *Sermons*, 224.

21. Outler, *Sermons*, 225.

22. Outler, *Sermons*, 225.

23. Outler, *Sermons*, 226.

be done in private. The intentionality, not just of not being judged but also of the emotive content of the prayer, is important. Long strings of unfelt words are as vain as repetition. The inward, invisible and spiritual component of the Christian life is tied to the outward expression. Likewise, having the intention alone is insufficient. A Christian is to do works of mercy, but they should arise out of a desire to do the will of God, not to gain glory in this life.

The Lords prayer becomes a vehicle for Wesley to unpack this idea. He lifts up the doing the whole of God's will for its own end, "that we may do it because it is his will."<sup>24</sup> The background assumption here is that God's will is always consistent with God's nature; The God who is Love wills what is most loving. If our intentions are holy because we have been properly formed in the *imago dei*, then our will must coincide with God's will. We do God's will because it is our will as well. This in no way overrides individual freedom to not do God's will, but the more closely we are formed to God's image, the less it is in our desires to not share in God's nature and will. This temptation to be led away from God is addressed in his exegesis of the "lead us not into temptation" petition. Temptation acts as a fog upon our spiritual senses and prevents us from clearly sensing God's will.

The epistemology and doctrine of the will of God and man is articulated more fully in "Discourse VIII." Using the passage on the light and dark eyes, Wesley goes into detail about how those who have had their spiritual senses restored can lose them again; "Even after God hath opened the eyes of our understanding, if we seek or desire

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24. Outler, *Sermons*, 232.



anything else than God, how soon our foolish heart darkened.”<sup>25</sup> The move being made is to explain how those who experience the new birth in all its richness can come to lose it if they lose sight of what they have gained and return to storing up treasure on earth. “The eye is the intention: what the eye is to the body, the intention is to the soul;” those who keep their intentions fixed on God are “full of true, divine knowledge.”<sup>26</sup> This light is also holiness and attending to it grants the Christian all the virtues. It forms the believer into the image of God, “continually filling thee with his own likeness, with justice, mercy and truth.”<sup>27</sup>

The issue for Wesley is not simply storing up treasure on earth but what that does to one’s soul. Treasure ties one to the world and takes our eyes off God; it alters our intentions. We gain wealth to appear better in the eyes of other people, seeking to please them for our own gain rather than to be in line with God’s will. Money, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. It is the intention behind the acquisition of the money. There is no fault in providing for one’s family or meeting one’s own needs. Luxuriant living, on the other hand, is the suicide of our souls. When people gain money, they are more likely to esteem themselves highly and credit the success with their own merits. What is at stake is not the theological nature of wealth but how that wealth affects the believer. The ascetic concerns are never far from Wesley’s mind.

In our own context, the prosperity gospel, with its vision of God as a kind of cosmic vending machine, would clearly be problematic for Wesley. Rather than

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25. Outler, *Sermons*, 241.

26. Outler, *Sermons*, 241.

27. Outler, *Sermons*, 241.

allowing ourselves to be conformed to God's will and image, this version of the Gospel has God give to us according to our own will—provided we have the right kind of faith. I can only imagine the despair that many were thrown into when, even though they still had faith, their retirement savings evaporated a year ago. A healthy ascetic theology is necessary for us to see past our own desire and wills and to allow us to be reformed into God's image.

If reading Wesley as a “folk theologian,” this set of sermons could be highly problematic given that he sometimes appears to pit inward and outward religion against each other (especially in the first two sermons). He proclaims each to be necessary, to the fault of those who say that the other is not. Calling his audience “folk” (as opposed to academic) seems to imply that they would not be able to grasp the full thrust of his intricate argument. When seen instead as a highly developed and nuanced ascetic theology, we can see Wesley working with real concerns. The result is a subtle set of moves that keep both inward and outward religion in play by making them two parts of a whole. The core move is that inward religion instigates holy intentions that express the will of God. Wesley succeeds in making his case. Did Wesley succeed in conveying this to the “folk?” I cannot argue with results; the success of the Methodist movement seems to indicate that Wesley was able to reach the common person.