

# Embrace Your Heritage: Spiritual Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition

ARTICLE FOR UNIT 2

**SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES** sounds like punishments meted out to monks in a monastery. Me, I'm more into Christian freedom. Who thought up this spiritual discipline stuff, anyway?

And "spiritual formation"? Wasn't that invented by a hermit battling demons in the desert? Not quite. Think of apostle Paul who said that those who gaze upon Christ "are being changed into his likeness" (2 Corinthians 3:18, RSV). Also, Paul prayed that "Christ be formed in you" (Galatians 4:19, RSV).

## Wesley and the Spiritual Disciplines

The early Wesleyans were so regular in practicing the spiritual disciplines that they were called "methodists." The *spiritual disciplines* are simply the practices that Christians, through the centuries, have found useful in the pursuit of *spiritual formation*, which is the pursuit of Christlikeness.

John Wesley searched the literature of Christians through the ages and reprinted the best for his people. He published *The Christian Library* in 50 volumes that included the best of "practical divinity" from the early church Fathers, from European, Puritan, and American Christians. Thus, core Christian disciplines poured into the Wesleyan-Holiness bloodstream from the first days.

One summer I read 2,809 of John Wesley's letters. In the letters we see the pastor, the spiritual guide, the soul friend at work. His theology is explained and applied in thousands of letters of spiritual guidance.

**Prayer:** Wesley taught his people to use spontaneous or extemporaneous prayers as well as written prayers from the Bible and *The Book of Common Prayer*. Wesley wrote prayers for worship, for daily devotions, for families, and prayers for children.

But in his letters it was extemporaneous prayer that Wesley prompted. To Jane Hilton he wrote, "Tell Him simply all you fear, all you feel, all you want." To Miss March he advised, "Pour out your soul and freely talk to God. . . . Pray just as you are led . . . in all simplicity. Be a little child hanging onto Him who loves you." Budding theologian, Joseph Benson, was told, "Let not study . . . entrench upon the hours of private prayer." Ann Bolton was warned, "Let not your works of mercy rob you of time for private prayer."

**Fasting:** "When you seek God with fasting added to prayer, you cannot seek His face in vain," Wesley wrote. Nevertheless, fasting was not strongly emphasized in the letters. Finding food was a much bigger problem in 18th-

century England than fasting food. Yet, the letters record fasting for a revival in Waterford, fasting over persecution in the Dales Circuit, and during John Wesley's final illness.

**Bible Reading and Meditation:** Wesley famously said, "O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God. . . . Let me be *homo unius libri*" (a man of one book).

Wesley's letters are filled with advice to be faithful in studying the Bible and meditating thereon. To preacher John Temnath, Wesley wrote, "Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily . . . else you will be a trifler all your days, and a . . . superficial preacher." Mrs. Woodhouse is to "stir up the gift of God . . . by reading, by meditation, and . . . by private prayer." Mrs. Gair is to "contrive . . . opportunities for . . . reading and meditation." Martha Chapman is advised, "Read a little, pray, and meditate much."

Wesley said that in studying the Bible he prayerfully considers a passage. "I then . . . consider parallel passages . . . I then meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God . . . what I thus learn, that I teach."

Many Christians today have been robbed of the practice of Christian meditation due to the popularity of Zen, yoga and transcendental meditation, etc. In the Wesleyan tradition, meditation has nothing to do with such Eastern forms. It certainly has nothing to do with emptying the mind to let it be filled with whatever chaos blows into it. Nor is it based on ascetic practices of the Christian mystics. Their "ladder" of *purgation, illumination, union* was just another way of trying to earn salvation, Wesley believed. For Wesley, meditation had a strong rational flavor and was more associated with reading than prayer. Miss March was instructed, "We learn to *think* by reading and meditating on what we have read."

No particular method of meditation is spelled out by Wesley, but he did reprint the five-step method of meditating on the Word written by Puritan, Richard Baxter. The five steps are: information, examination, dehortation (*warn, admonish, urge*), consolation, and exhortation. It includes "stepping into the Bible scene"—talking with the Bible characters, and hearing their songs, "hallelujahs," questions, and proclamations.

Last night I read 2 Timothy and found myself meditating on the closing words. I usually think of Paul as a brash, blunt instructor who gave the orders. I saw, however, the more human side of Paul. Tim, I'm cold and lonely

here. Bring my coat and my books. Please get here before winter, please . . .” I wanted to rush right out and take Paul my overcoat, a suitcase full of books, and maybe a couple of Subway sandwiches.

Wait! Do I know anyone who needs a coat? needs some company? in prison? imprisoned by disease or addiction?

It is not enough to read a chapter and then turn on the *Tonight Show*. Meditate on the scripture, step into the scene, and fill your mind and heart with what the Word wants to teach you. It’s thoroughly Wesleyan.

### Wesleyan Spiritual Formation Groups

Just as entire sanctification was the distinctive mark of Wesleyan theology, the distinctive mark of Wesleyan spiritual formation was the covenant groups. D. L. Moody declared that Wesley’s face-to-face groups was the best plan to disciple converts ever devised.

Evangelist George Whitefield observed, “Brother Wesley acted wisely—the souls that were awakened under his ministry, he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected and my people are a rope of sand.”

#### Face-to-Face Groups

All members of the Society were required to attend a weekly “class” of 12 people. In addition, serious Methodists were invited to join a “band,” a group of four to six people “united in order to pray together, . . . to watch over one another in love,” and to pour out their hearts and souls “without reserve and without disguise.” A high level of friendship, faithfulness, and accountability marked the life of the bands.

#### Faith Mentors and Twin Souls

Perhaps the most neglected part of our Wesleyan heritage of spirituality is the use of faith mentoring and spiritual friend pairs.

In the letters, I discovered hundreds of times when Wesley assigned a convert (a babe in Christ) to the care of a “spiritual father” or “nursing mother.” That is faith mentoring on purpose.

Wesley also brought together “twin souls” to act as “soul friends.” Again, hundreds of examples could be cited. Here are three.

To Mary Bousanquet he wrote, “You have need of a steady guide, and one that knows you well.” To Ann Bolton: “It is undoubtedly expedient for you to have a friend in whom you can fully confide that can always be near you. . . . I am glad that a good Providence has given you one . . . You can certainly trust her . . . she has . . . understanding, piety, and experience.” Ebenezer Blackwell also needed “knee-to-knee and eye-to-eye” spiritual guidance: “If you had always one or two faithful friends

near you who could speak the very truth from their heart and watch over you in love, you would swiftly advance.”

Are there believers in your church who have no “soul friend” to whom they can pour out their hearts without reserve and without disguise? The discipline of covenant groups, faith mentoring, and soul friends is at the core of our Wesleyan-Holiness heritage.

### Christian Service as a Spiritual Discipline

“We do not,” declared Wesley, “acknowledge him to have one grain of faith who is not continually doing good, who is not willing to ‘spend and be spent in doing all good, as he has opportunity, to all men.’” This theme comes up hundreds of times in Wesley’s writings. Christian service, in the Wesleyan tradition, is an integral part of spiritual formation.

There is not space to describe the squalid social conditions when the Industrial Revolution howled like a blizzard through the winter of England’s soul in the 18th century. Suffice it to say that our spiritual ancestors, the early Methodists, were surrounded by need that they could not ignore. Among other things they:

1. Established the first free medical clinic in England.
2. Built an orphanage in Newcastle, a Poor House, and a Widow’s Home in London.
3. Distributed food and clothing daily in London and Bristol.
4. Organized the Sick Visitor’s Corporation in London.
5. Established the Lying-in Hospital for destitute and unwed mothers. Women received prenatal and postnatal care, religious instruction, and vocational training!
6. Started a small business loan fund for Methodists.
7. Created the Stranger’s Friend Society—a charity for non-Methodists only.
8. Operated a factory to employ out-of-work Methodists.
9. Took over the Bristol prison and reformed it and made it a model for the nation.
10. They secured signed petitions from a million people who promised to use “no sugar or rum” until slavery was abolished in the Americas.

That’s just the top 10 list.

Have you embraced the spiritual disciplines and spiritual formation practices of the early Wesleyans? If not, step forward and engage your Wesleyan-Holiness heritage as you study this quarter.

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