

Spiritually Minded, Earthly Good
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From the foundations of Christianity, God has used monastic streams to renew and reinvigorate the Body of Christ. The early Methodist movement was in many ways a monastic stream of renewal in the established Church. In his writings, John Wesley offers a glimpse of a holiness movement that dispels any notion of monastic streams as isolated and boring. In Wesley's reflections on the early Methodist holiness movement, we find nothing less than the provocative, passionate heart of a God who knows how to love His weary Bride to life.

God often reveals His Kingdom through small ways that lead to big changes (Sine, p. 21). God plants seeds of His Kingdom in individual hearts (Bartholomew & Goheen, p. 147; Wesley, *Sermon Seven*). As individuals allow the seeds to grow, the fruit produced in their lives affects the world around them, allowing them to "more fully and authentically give expression to [the Kingdom of God] that is already here" (Sine, p. 27). They become caught up in God's mission to activate His Kingdom in every heart, and the Kingdom spreads from heart to heart (Wesley, *Signs of the Times*).

In describing the spread of God's Kingdom, Wesley refers to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) and the metaphor of salt: "even as salt conveys its own savour into that which is seasoned thereby, without any noise, and without being liable to any outward observation (Wesley, *Sermon Twenty-Four*)." Just as salt permeates, invigorates and draws out the true flavor of a dish, the Kingdom presence of the Lord in people's hearts permeates, invigorates and draws out the true flavor of the lives around them. The salt must be pure and full of savor, or it has no impact. Without God's deep work in people's hearts, they become like salt that has lost its flavor. Wesley brings to mind the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:13:

"If the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out, and trodden under foot of men:" If ye who were holy and heavenly-minded, and consequently zealous of good works, have no longer that savour in yourselves, and do therefore no longer season others; if you are grown flat, insipid, dead, both careless of your own soul and useless to the souls of other men; `wherewith shall ye be salted? How shall ye be recovered? (Wesley, *Sermon Twenty-Four*)

For Wesley, Christians' savor as the "salt of the earth" comes from the presence of God in their hearts, which must be sought and nurtured. The key is a life of holiness (Wesley, *Sermon Seven*), in which individuals pray without ceasing, and seek God first, with their whole hearts (Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist*); they spend time in His presence, letting Him search their hearts and fill their spirits. Their hearts are a pool that must be fed continuously by the spring of the Holy Spirit. As they drink of the presence of the Lord, they become salt filled with savor.

The life of holiness, centered on prayer and seeking God's presence, is not only found in the writings of Wesley. This life of holiness also characterizes the monastic movement that grew out of early Christianity. From the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the fourth century, to the new monastic streams that today are revisiting ancient practices of holiness (Sine, p. 50), the monastic movement has been a source of renewal and mission throughout Christian history. Whether holiness is practiced within a monastic community, or in the quiet places of an individual's heart, the monastic stream is a place where the springs of the Holy Spirit replenish and bring a deeper relationship with God.

Wesley not only encouraged individuals to find this place in their hearts, and devote themselves to God. He also encouraged the formation of "bands," small groups of Christians that met at least once a week, "in order to 'confess our faults one to another,' and pray one for another that we may be healed" (Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, p. 10). They sang and prayed together, then spoke "freely and plainly, the true state of our soul, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting." These bands, like monastic communities in the midst of daily life, were places to seek deeper holiness, honesty of heart, and accountability. They were a place where God could nurture a "provocative" (to use Graham Tomlin's term) Kingdom-shaped presence in the hearts of those who sought Him.

Nurtured in hearts and in small bands of people, did the provocative presence of God just sit in those pools of the heart, for personal use only? This concern is raised against ascetic movements. Monasticism is sometimes seen as elevating individualism above community (Snyder, pp. 53-4). Even monastic communities may be viewed as inward-looking, avoiding fellowship with other Christians and interaction with the world.

In his book, *In the Heart of the Desert*, John Chryssavgis poses the question: “Are the Desert Fathers and Mothers anti-social figures?” (p. 79) Indeed, in the fourth century, many of those who chose an ascetic lifestyle went into the desert, away from the cities where Christianity had become legalized and, the ascetics believed, compromised in purity. Abba Allois, one of the Desert Fathers, seems to confirm the primacy of solitude with his words, “Until you can say in your heart, ‘Only I and God are in the world,’ you will not be at peace” (Ward, p. 119).

Another concern is that ascetics may consider themselves better than others, or may be considered better by others. In the eighth century, as monasticism became a major center for the spread of Christianity in Western European villages, people came to the monasteries to seek wisdom and healing, as they would have gone previously to soothsayers and wizards and the shrines of local gods (Irvin & Sunquist, p. 350).

Regardless of appearances, it is important to see how God works beneath the surface. A limited perspective of monastic streams will cause us to miss the fullness of God’s renewal and mission. God calls His people to come out from the world and be separate (II Corinthians 6:17), and to abide in Him (John 15:4). Jesus also commands His followers to love their neighbor (Matthew 22:39), and to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). First He commands that they love God with all their heart and soul and mind (Matthew 22:37) – the same commandment upon which Wesley bases his call to a life of holiness (Wesley, *Sermon Seven*). Does a contradiction exist between pursuit of inner holiness and love of neighbor?

In one of God’s ironies, it is through the pursuit of inner holiness that individuals are able to go into the world with the love of Christ, to be the pure, savor-filled “salt of the earth.” By abiding in Christ, seeking Him first, drinking of His Spirit, letting Him fill and overflow them, individuals are then able to minister in the world, sharing what they have received. They cannot share with the world what they have not received.

The question that remains is this: Can they avoid sharing, and keep that spring-fed pool to themselves? The answer, and the model for true monastic streams, is Jesus. In His ministry, Jesus modeled times of solitude followed by times of serving others. His ability to give flowed from His time alone with God, a time when God’s Spirit would consume Him, renew Him, and fill Him with the savor of God’s Kingdom. With God’s provocative presence alive in His heart, and God’s love overflowing, Jesus then ministered everywhere God called Him. Jesus demonstrated that when a person seeks God with his or her whole heart, God will turn that

person's focus to others: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). When people truly receive God's provocative, Kingdom presence in their hearts, they have no choice but to share with the world. It is a commandment, but it is also the fruit of His work in their hearts, the outpouring of His Spirit in them.

Cynthia Bourgeault tells the story of Thomas Merton, who sought the monastic lifestyle as an escape from the world. In the process, his heart was transformed. On a "routine shopping trip into town he was suddenly engulfed in a blinding epiphany of love" for the people all around him (Bourgeault, p. 154). He realized he was not separate from them, but they were together in Christ, and he was overwhelmed with Christ's love for them (Bourgeault, p. 155). As Bourgeault concludes, "If you embrace a path that begins in kenosis, you will wind up in perichoresis; that's the wager. That's also the Church – its vision and its path in a nutshell" (Bourgeault, p. 155). When people truly turn their hearts to God, He will turn their hearts to others; that is His mission.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers, as evidenced through their many sayings that have been collected and published (see Ward for a compilation), also demonstrated this fruit of God's working in their hearts. Abba Antony, considered the father of the desert movement, is recorded as saying, "Our life and death are with our neighbor. If we do good to our neighbor, we do good to God; if we cause our neighbor to stumble, we sin against Christ" (Ward, p. 177). With a focus on community, hospitality, service to and sacrifice for others, and pursuit of deeper understanding in relationships, all of which is apparent through their sayings, the Desert Fathers and Mothers exemplified the outward flow of the monastic stream. The springs of the Holy Spirit overflowed the pools of their hearts and impacted countless individuals and the early Church.

In the same way, with its focus on heart transformation and weekly band meetings of worship, prayer and accountability, early Methodism served as a monastic stream of renewal in the established Church. Wesley describes the individual in pursuit of God "as having in him 'a well of water springing up into everlasting life,' and overflowing his soul with peace and joy (Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist*). Wesley says the Kingdom of God "is the immediate fruit of God's reigning in the soul" (Wesley, *Sermon Seven*). If a person's heart truly has been changed by God, then out of the overflow of the Kingdom in that person's heart, he or she cannot help but spread the genuine love of the Lord to others (Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist*). "So long as true religion abides in our hearts," Wesley says, "it is impossible to conceal it, as well as absolutely contrary to the design of its great Author" (Wesley, *Sermon Twenty-Four*).

The key to a life of holiness that is effective in the mission of God, then, is a heart that truly receives from and overflows with the provocative presence of God. This is not false piety, but genuine holiness, sought by hearts that have been changed by, and desire to be changed by, the presence of the Lord. Wesley reminds us of the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:16: “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist*).

Despite the appearance of inward focus, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, as well as the monastic movements of later centuries overflowed their banks, bringing renewal to the Church in the mission of God. The early Methodist bands, by seeking genuine holiness, presence of the Lord and accountability, could also be characterized as a renewal movement within the Church. Today, cell groups within churches and new monastic streams carry the same potential for the Holy Spirit to flood their banks, bringing renewal to a weary Body of Christ. The key is hearts ready to be real with God, so that He, through these hearts, can be real to a hurting world.

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