

The Spirituality of John Wesley
Pathways of Faith, Journeys with God workshop
presented at McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church, Norman, OK
presented by: Kevin M. Watson
September 29, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

Let me just start out by saying it is a privilege to be here. My name is Kevin Watson and I am currently the pastor of Lamont United Methodist Church in Lamont, OK. If you are not familiar with where Lamont is, it is 12 miles west of exit 214 on I-35. I have been in Lamont for almost 2 and a half years. Before that I was in seminary at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. And before seminary I was a student at the University of Oklahoma and a member of this congregation. So for me this is really a homecoming.

I am curious, how many of you that are here today are a member of this congregation? I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you. It is because of your congregation's faithfulness that I was given the opportunity to first work with the youth group here and go on my first mission trip, which ultimately led to my calling to ministry. I am so grateful for this church and all that it has done for me. Phil Fenn and Dick House were both instrumental in helping me work through my calling, embrace it, and head off to seminary. They have both also continued to be supportive and very helpful as I have transitioned back to Oklahoma and into life as a full time pastor. Scott Meier also gave me many opportunities to gain experience and grow in confidence in my calling. Scott taught me about servant leadership by the way in which he was constantly seeking to simply meet people's needs.

I don't mean to devalue Phil Fenn, or Dick House, or Scott Meier, but there was one other person I met here who has had by far the biggest impact on my life, and that was a woman who I met here whose name at the time was Melissa Gore, and it is now Melissa Watson. We literally met in this church, I proposed to her in this church, and we were married in this church. I don't know if Melissa knew what she was getting herself into, but she has always been by my side, and I would not be able to do this without her.

All that is to say that I am very thankful for the role that this church has played in my life. Thank you for supporting and encouraging me in my journey, this congregation is a big part of the reason I am here today.

Finally, there is one more thing I would like to briefly mention to you before we get to the task at hand. I have co-authored a book that deals with some of what we will talk about this morning called: *Reclaiming the Wesleyan Tradition: John Wesley's Sermons for Today*. This book is intended to be an introduction to John Wesley's theology through the primary medium through which he explained his theology, the sermon. In this book you will read all or part of 13 sermons, 12 were written by John Wesley and 1 by his brother Charles. These sermons are accompanied by lessons that are designed to help you digest Wesley's sermon and to apply it to your life. The material is divided up so that each lesson focuses on a different part of the Way of Salvation. This would be a great resource if a small group that you are a part of is interested in learning more about our Wesleyan heritage as United Methodists. If you are interested and just can't wait to get your hands on a copy, I have brought a few copies with me this morning that are available on the resource table for \$10.

Ok, enough about me, let's talk about John Wesley! This morning our topic is The Spirituality of John Wesley. This is a very broad topic, and I would just like to go ahead and apologize to you up front that I am afraid I will probably not be able to do it justice in the time that we have together this morning. But I will try to address it as thoroughly and as helpfully as I can by seeking to answer three different questions: 1) What is spirituality? Answering this question will help us to start off by all being on the same page, and to get a broad view of what we are talking about before we jump into a Wesleyan view of spirituality. 2) What is Wesley's spirituality? I will spend much more time on this question than on the first one. Some of what I will try to do is give us a common Wesleyan vocabulary for talking about spirituality and I will also try to highlight which parts of spirituality are unique, or particular foci of Wesley's approach to spirituality. 3) What contribution does Wesleyan spirituality have to make to the church today? John Wesley was not interested in giving people head knowledge just for the sake of giving them information, Wesley's desire was always that what he said would not just

penetrate the head, but the heart as well. So, after talking about Wesley's approach to spirituality, I will try to focus on the "So What?" question of what difference does this make for United Methodists in Oklahoma?

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

And so our first question this morning is, What is spirituality? Different people have come to very different conclusions about what spirituality is and maybe even more so about what spirituality is good for. This morning we will seek to look at a specifically Wesleyan understanding of spirituality, but before we do that I want to take just a minute to try and make sure that we are all on the same page.

First, let me say a few words about what spirituality is not. Dallas Willard in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* argues that "Spirituality has... come to be regarded by the world as those futile, self-torturing excesses of strange men and women who lived in far-off, benighted places and times."¹ In other words, many people have come to see spirituality as an impossible to live up to set of practices, or way of living that people used to somehow live up to, but today only lead you to failure and feeling guilty. There is also a perception because of the word spirituality itself that it is practices that are disconnected from our physical existence. But again Willard argues that "Our soul is not something we can separate from the body and hold pure without regard to the body to which it belongs."² So, properly understood, spirituality is not a way of living that seeks to disconnect our bodily lives from our spiritual lives. Rather, as Willard puts it so well, "*The disciplines for the spiritual life, rightly understood, are time-tested activities consciously undertaken by us as new men or women to allow our spirit ever-increasing sway over our embodied selves.*"³

And so we begin to see not just what spirituality isn't, but also what spirituality is. The last quotation from Dallas Willard suggests that Christian spirituality involves "disciplines" which are activities that we consciously undertake with the goal of gaining increasingly power "over our embodied selves." Another way of saying this is that spiritu-

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. (Harper: San Francisco, 1991), 79.

² Willard, 81.

³ Willard, 86.

ality is a way of living that involves practicing what we believe so that our lives are molded and shaped and actually become more and more like Christ. Christian spirituality then does not assume that upon having a saving encounter with Christ, that we are immediately and fully transformed into mature and obedient Christians. Rather, Christian spirituality, if anything, assumes that there is a difference between a Christian who has just begun the journey towards becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ and a Christian who has made significant progress in becoming a deeply committed Christian.

John Gooch, author of *John Wesley for the 21st Century* provides a very concise definition of spirituality, "Spirituality is about loving God."⁴ Gooch expands this definition by arguing that "Christian spirituality is focused on God in Christ. It practices clearly defined spiritual disciplines, with the goal of a closer relationship with God in Christ."⁵ Let's look at one other source, before we try to sum all of this up. If you are looking for a definition of a word, what better place to look than a dictionary! The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines Christian spirituality as "the living of the Christian life... [which] has many dimensions that are expressed through rituals and practices to enhance the sense of God's presence and reality."⁶ In looking at these different sources, it seems that there is consensus about what Christian spirituality is: *Christian spirituality involves those disciplines or practices that are purposefully undertaken in order to help Christians become deeply committed followers of Christ who habitually practice their faith.* In other words, spirituality, for the Christian is about growing in holiness. It is about the process by which we participate in God's sanctification of our lives.

WHAT IS WESLEY'S SPIRITUALITY?

Now that we have a working definition of spirituality, the disciplines or practices that are purposefully undertaken in order to help Christians become deeply committed followers of Christ who habitually practice their faith, we can turn our attention to the second question that I would like to try to answer this morning: What is Wesley's spirituality? In order to answer this question accurately, we actually first have to take a step

⁴ John O. Gooch, *John Wesley for the 21st Century*. (Discipleship Resources: Nashville, 2006), 8.

⁵ Gooch, 10.

⁶ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 1996), 268.

backwards. That is for Wesley, before we can say anything about what we do in order to grow closer to God, we have to first recognize that there is nothing that we can do on our own in order to work our way to God. The Christian life, for Wesley, is empowered by grace every single step of the way. If we just go straight to talking about those disciplines or practices that are purposefully undertaken in order to help us as Christians to become deeply committed followers of Christ who habitually practice our faith, we can begin to sound as if we are falling into the trap of works righteousness, or trying to earn our salvation. This would be a great disservice to Wesley's theology, because one of the most important moments of his life was when he came to realize that he was saved and forgiven by grace through Jesus sacrifice for him on the cross. Wesley famously recorded his "Aldersgate experience" in his journal, writing:

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, 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."⁷

So a key realization for Wesley was that relying upon spiritual disciplines, no matter how dedicated or consistent he was in practicing them, would not merit him anything before God. He realized that he could only be made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ and the gracious forgiveness that comes through him.

For Wesley, then, grace permeates every part of the Christian life, we come to an awareness of our need for God by grace, we are forgiven and made new by grace, and we are enabled to participate in our salvation by grace. Thus, any discussion of Christian spirituality from a Wesleyan perspective has to begin and end with God's amazing grace!

Yet, one of the distinctive marks of Wesleyan theology in general is the way in which he balances grace with works. For Wesley grace is essential, but our participation is also absolutely critical. As theologian Randy Maddox has put it, there is "in Wesley's work an abiding concern to preserve the vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity: without God's grace, we *cannot* be saved;

⁷ John Wesley, *Journal*. May 24, 1738.

while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God's grace *will not* save."⁸ So, we are born again, or brought back to life, by God's grace. Another way of looking at this is that before we come to faith in Christ and receive forgiveness of our past sins, we cannot even be considered to be responsible for our actions, because we are in chains to sin. God's grace makes us responsible once again. This same grace also makes us able to then respond to God's grace and begin to work out our salvation.

So, grace is a crucial foundation for Wesleyan spirituality because it enables us to participate in our own growth in holiness. For Wesley, spirituality is the way in which we participate with God's grace in renewing our lives in the image of God, or it is the way that we participate in the Holy Spirit's work of sanctifying us, or making us holy. Wesley discusses this in his fifth discourse on the Sermon on the Mount which is based on Matthew 5:17-20. Listen to Wesley's comparison of the spirituality of a Pharisee vs. the spirituality of a Christian:

The righteousness of a Christian exceeds all this righteousness of a scribe or Pharisee by fulfilling the spirit as well as the letter of the law, by inward as well as outward obedience. In this, in the spirituality of it, it admits of no comparison. This is the point which our Lord has so largely proved in the whole tenor of this discourse. Their righteousness was external only; Christian righteousness is in the inner man. The Pharisee 'cleansed the outside of the cup and the platter'; the Christian is clean within. The Pharisee labored to present God with a good life; the Christian with a holy heart. The one shook off the leaves, perhaps the fruits of sin; the other 'lays the axe to the root', as not being content with the outward form of godliness, how exact soever it be, unless the life, the spirit, the power of God unto salvation, be felt in the inmost soul.⁹

Perhaps this description of the goal of the Christian life could be just as well summarized with the words that Jesus spoke when he was asked by a Pharisee what the greatest commandment in the Law was. "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."¹⁰ The goal of Wesleyan spirituality, then, is not just to do certain outward things, although this is certainly the most

⁸ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. (Kingswood: Nashville, 1994), 19.

⁹ John Wesley, *Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Fifth*, IV.11.

¹⁰ Matt. 22:37-40.

visible aspect of Wesleyan spirituality. The ultimate goal is to be completely renewed in the image of God, to be made perfect in love, which Wesley defined as fulfilling Jesus' double commandment to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself. I am guessing it is a safe bet that we all have at least some experience with acting towards someone in a way that is very different than how we are feeling towards them on the inside. You can be very civil with someone when you interact with them in a public atmosphere, while harboring a perfect hatred for them in your heart. This is the kind of spirituality that Wesley condemns and is desperate for us to avoid. He wants us to become people who are not just nice outwardly, but who actually love God and all who we come into contact with.

Well, thus far we have said something about what Wesley meant by spirituality, but we have not actually said anything about Wesley's practice of spirituality. In order to answer the question, "What is Wesley's spirituality?" we need to develop what Wesley's spirituality looked like. And this is where it starts to get really good, because a major part of Wesley's genius is that he did not just have the ability to explain theological ideas or concepts, but he had the ability to develop an actual method by which people could reliably expect to actually become deeply committed Christians, people who began to live more and more like Jesus. In fact, in order for Methodism to reclaim its Wesleyan heritage, even more than reclaiming a fully Wesleyan theology, I think we need to work to reclaim the method that made us **Methodist**, because this was for Wesley where the rubber hit the road, this was where he expected to see results, lives changed and transformed by the gospel. But as we turn to the outward expression that Wesley expected Methodists to follow in order to grow in their faith, let me remind us one last time, that the outward expressions were always designed to flow from the inward reality of a life that is connected to God. If we just clean the outside of the cup, well we still don't have a cup that very many people will want to drink out of!

Wesleyan spirituality is summarized in a fairly short essay that John Wesley wrote that continues to be printed in our *Book of Discipline* called "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies," often referred to simply as "The General Rule". This morning I want to argue that "The General Rule" provides the basic blueprint for an authentic Wesleyan spirituality. In looking at "The General Rule" we will find

that Wesley's spirituality is holistic, that is it takes into consideration all parts of the Christian life. It is inward looking (that is concerned with cleaning the inside of the cup) as well as outward looking (that is concerned with causing us to actually live differently because of our faith and the internal transformation that is occurring within us). It is simple, yet thorough, and ultimately, I believe it continues to have an important contribution to make to United Methodism and Christianity in general.

The general rule was simple enough that it could be printed in a roughly three page pamphlet. If you knew Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior, and you followed the general rule, Wesley was happy. And, he believed that you were almost guaranteed to grow in your faith. So what is "The General Rule?" It is three rules that people who joined the early methodist societies committed to follow. The three rules were first, do no harm, second, do all the good that you can, and third, attend upon all the ordinances of God. We will flush each one of these out.

The first rule was to do no harm. Here is how Wesley expected people to evidence their desire of salvation:

by avoiding evil in every kind; especially that which is most generally practised: Such is, the taking the name of God in vain; the profaning the day of the Lord...; drunkenness,... fighting, quarreling, brawling; brother going to law with brother; returning evil for evil, or railing for railing;... the buying or selling uncustomed goods; the giving or taking things on usury, that is, unlawful interest;... doing to others as we would not they should do unto us; doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as the "putting on of gold or costly apparel;"... the singing those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God; softness, and needless self-indulgence; laying up treasures upon earth; borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.¹¹

Well, I am sure that none of you have ever sung a song, or read a book which did not tend to the knowledge or love of God! And we probably don't have to think too hard to get an idea about what Wesley would have to say about most television programs! Do no harm may seem very simple at first, but a closer look at the list of what not to do probably catches most of us in at least an area or two that hits a little too close to home.

¹¹ John Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rule of Our United Societies."

But the point for Wesley is not to make you feel guilty, and it is not to make you feel like it is impossible to be a faithful Christian. The point is that the first thing that Wesley strongly believes is necessary for a faithful spirituality is to stop doing the things that lead us away from the presence of God. I don't know about you, but I love to watch the Houston Astros play baseball, but very rarely has watching baseball been a worshipful experience for me. And I'm afraid when it has, it was probably closer to idolatry than worshipping God! The key to what not to do is seen in Wesley's discussion of books or songs to sing, he urges us not to do things that don't lead us in a positive direction towards loving God.

Wesley doesn't stay on the list of what not to do for too long though. If the first rule is what not to do, the second and third rules list what to do. The second and third rules also provide a summary of what Wesley called the means of grace. The means of grace can be defined as "specific channels through which God conveys divine grace to God's people."¹² The means of grace include both acts of mercy and acts of piety. The second general rule deals with acts of mercy and the third deals with acts of piety. So, Wesley expects Methodists to continue to evidence their desire of salvation by:

Secondly, by doing good, by being, in every kind, merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as is possible, to all men;— ... by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison;... by instructing reproving, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with;... By doing good especially to them that are of the household of faith,... By all possible diligence and frugality, that the gospel be not blamed: By running with patience the race that is set before them, "denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily;"

These works of mercy are things that we do specifically in order to obey the second part of Jesus' double commandment, to love God and neighbor. In other words, these are works of mercy that we do in order to express outwardly the love that we feel inwardly for our neighbor. As we look at this list, we are again reminded of the importance of a solid foundation for Wesleyan spirituality. Because, if the idea of clothing the naked, or visiting those in prison, or sacrificing our comfort for the sake of our neighbor seems ridiculously impossible or uncomfortable, for Wesley that is the symptom of a

¹² Douglas M. Strong, Sarah B. Dorrance, Robert McDonald-Walker, Ingrid Y. Want, and Kevin M. Watson, *Reclaiming the Wesleyan Tradition: John Wesley's Sermons for Today*. (Discipleship Resources: Nashville, 2007), 86.

lack of love, rather than it being due to Jesus' command being unreasonable or unrealistic. Wesley's spirituality is original in the way that he put it together, but it is not original in its content. His content is based solidly on what he found when he read Scripture. Wesley's emphasis in the second general rule upon doing good to others, for instance, can simply be seen to be a reflection on passages of Scripture like James 2:14-17:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

The third and final general rule is to attend upon all the ordinances of God. This is likely the one that sounds the most out-dated to our modern ears. Yet, if we were to look at the three general rules and ask which one was dealing with spirituality, I would guess that most people would say the third one, because it deals with the obvious things that Christians do as expressions of Christian spirituality. In this third rule Wesley describes the ordinances of God as:

the public worship of God; the ministry of the word, either read or expounded; the supper of the Lord; family and private prayer; searching the Scriptures; and fasting, or abstinence.

This third rule describes the means of grace that Wesley often referred to as works of piety. He also occasionally referred to these works of piety as instituted means of grace, because they are "practices commanded by Jesus Christ in the Scriptures for his disciples."¹³ As is seen in the third general rule, Wesley consistently named prayer, searching the Scriptures, and taking the supper of the Lord as means of grace that were instituted by Christ. Wesley also often added fasting (as he does in the third rule) and fellowship in Christian community as instituted means of grace.

Many of us, if we are honest, are probably breathing a sigh of relief right about now, because we have finally found something fairly concrete and comfortable, something that fit our expectations of Christian spirituality. Saying that we should read the Bible and pray isn't very creative or surprising. Yet, most Christians know that they should do these things, though few actually do on a daily basis. In a sense reading the

¹³ Strong, 86.

Bible and praying can be seen as Christian spirituality “Lite.” It is a great place to start if you aren’t currently in the habit of following these practices. However, if this is the extent of Christian spirituality for you, Wesley would say, “You’ve got a long way to go!” I won’t say more about the importance of Bible study or prayer, because my sense is that these are things we all know we should do, it is just a matter of whether we are obedient to habitually practicing them or not.

The third instituted means of grace is Communion which Wesley referred to as “the grand channel whereby the grace of his Spirit was conveyed to the souls of all the children of God.”¹⁴ Have any of you ever seen the movie *Ghostbusters*? I don’t remember which one it was, but every time I read Wesley’s reference to Communion as the grand channel whereby the grace of God is given to us, I see the part in the movie where they are standing in the sewer beneath New York City looking at this river of hot pink slime that is flowing past them. At one point one of the *Ghostbusters* is even pulled in and another one jumps in after him. That is the vision that I get when I think about Communion being the grand channel by which grace is given to God’s children! For Wesley, Communion represents this unending river of grace that we can jump into every time we come to the Lord’s table! It is ready and waiting for us. For Wesley, then, the Eucharist is the utmost place where we can expect to encounter God’s grace in a tangible and life changing way. As a result, I think Wesley would be surprised and saddened by the current United Methodist practice of taking Communion only once a month. I am also not sure how excited he would be about the ways in which we often times try to “speed up” Communion by passing it down the isles, just like we take the offering. A Wesleyan spirituality would have Communion as one of its cornerstones.

Wesley also mentions fasting when he talks about spiritual disciplines much more frequently than we are probably comfortable with. Wesley fasted at least weekly throughout his life. Sometimes he fasted twice a week. Now, we need to remember in an age of intense weight consciousness that fasting was not for Wesley a form of dieting or a means of losing weight! It was not intended to be a form of torture or a way of making himself miserable. Rather, it was valuable because it was a means of reminding

¹⁴ John Wesley, *Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Sixth*. III.11.

himself that he was ultimately dependent upon God for provision. It also provided a very concrete expression that he could make the flesh submit to his will and his desire to follow God.

Finally, I want to say a brief word about Christian accountability. Wesley often talked about watching over one another in love. He does not mention it in the third general rule, but that is simply because the beginning of the essay tells the story of how people formed together in order to watch over one another in love and hold each other accountable for growing in their faith. In other words, small group accountability was the foundation, the bedrock, of Wesleyan spirituality. If someone came to Wesley and said, I have come to have faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior. What do I do now? The first thing Wesley would have done would have been to place them in a small group where they would be held accountable for growing in their faith.

For Wesley stagnation was impossible in the Christian life, you were either moving forward and growing closer to God, or you were moving backward and falling away from the presence of God. I believe that the most powerful way in which God's Spirit moved within the early Methodist movement was through this method of small group accountability. There seemed to be a powerful way in which God blessed our spiritual forebears as they came together and confessed their sins to one another and sought support and encouragement for growing in their faith. Methodism in general seemed to move closer to God as individual Methodists came together in groups and made themselves vulnerable to each other because of their desperate determination to grow closer to God. Wesley saw from experience that when Christians were left to go it alone, more often than not, they fell away from the grace that they had received. For example, in 1763, 25 years into the Methodist revival, John Wesley wrote in his journal on August 25th:

I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokehire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connection. And the consequence is that nine in ten of the once awakened are now faster asleep than ever.¹⁵

¹⁵ John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries*, 21:424.

In other words, Wesley found that where Christians were joined together in the accountability structure that he organized, they tended to grow in their faith. However, when they tried to just go it alone, they nearly always tended to gradually lose their zeal for loving God with everything and loving their neighbor as themselves. Over time they began to live more and more like the rest of the world, instead of living as Jesus Christ called them to live. We will come back to this as part of the answer to our last question.

Before we move to the last question, I would like to note that when we think of spirituality, we tend to think of things like reading the Bible and praying, we think about specific ways to pray that are outside the box, or we think of more exotic forms of spirituality that very few people practice today, like fasting on a regular basis. But I think it is significant that John Wesley lists these practices as the last of the three general rules. He seems to be taking his followers through a process. The first step to Wesleyan spirituality is to stop sinning, to repent of the things that draw us away from God, to literally turn away from them. The second step is to begin to form habits of holiness that cause us to actively express and grow in our love for others. And then, then the third step is to form those other habits of holiness that cause us to actively express and grow in our love for God. Now I am certainly not arguing that Wesley is trying to rank love of neighbor above love of God. That would certainly undermine my contention that Wesley formed his spirituality based on what he found in Scripture, since Jesus listed love of God as the greatest commandment and love of neighbor as the second greatest commandment. But, I think this order has a lot to teach contemporary United Methodists.

WHAT CONTRIBUTIONS DOES WESLEYAN SPIRITUALITY HAVE TO MAKE TO THE CHURCH TODAY?

So now, hopefully we have a basic understanding of spirituality, we have defined it as those disciplines or practices that are purposefully undertaken in order to help Christians become deeply committed followers of Christ who habitually practice their faith. And we have looked at the grace-empowered basis of Wesleyan spirituality and we have used the general rule as the basis for our understanding of Christian spirituality. The general rule is simply to do no harm, do all the good that you can, and attend

upon all the ordinances of God. This leads us to our third and final question, What contributions does Wesleyan spirituality have to make to the church today?

I think the first important contribution that Wesleyan spirituality offers to the contemporary church is in the form of two helpful syntheses. As Christians have developed different approaches to spirituality they have often overemphasized either faith at the expense of works, on the one hand, or they have overemphasized working out your salvation at the expense of having faith in Jesus Christ. Wesleyan spirituality offers a helpful balance that emphasizes both the importance of faith *and* works. Because for Wesley we cannot do anything on our own, we cannot make any contribution to our relationship with God until we are born again, until we come to have faith in Jesus Christ. We are brought to faith by grace, we are forgiven by grace, and we are enabled to participate in working out our salvation by grace. Wesley clearly and consistently focuses on the importance of faith in the Christian life. Thus, a Wesleyan spirituality can truly say “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”

Yet, on the other hand, for Wesleyan spirituality, the ultimate goal of grace is to restore us to a right relationship with God so that we are able to actually willingly participate in our salvation again. Therefore, for Wesley, a central goal or purpose of grace is enabling our participation. Thus a Wesleyan spirituality affirms that salvation is by grace through faith, while at the same time insisting on the importance of “working out your salvation.” Wesley provided a helpful way to balance faith and works.

The second synthesis that still has a contribution to make to the church is Wesley’s synthesis between works of piety and works of mercy. Christians have often fallen into the trap of emphasizing personal piety at the expense of works of mercy or justice. This type of spirituality focuses on the individual’s relationship with Jesus Christ, but does not pay sufficient attention to the role that we are called to play within the Body of Christ. On the other hand, those within the church who have focused on the importance of works of mercy and social justice have often overemphasized mercy, while underemphasizing or sometimes even almost ignoring completely the importance of a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ. As we have just seen from “The General Rule” Wesleyan spirituality considers a faithful spirituality to be one that combines both

works of piety and works of mercy. A spirituality based on a Wesleyan understanding of spirituality will be one that remembers that Jesus commanded his followers to work out their salvation by loving God, which people typically work on through what Wesley defines as works of piety; such as praying and searching the Scriptures, and Jesus also commanded his followers to work out their salvation by loving their neighbor, which people typically work on through what Wesley defines as works of mercy; like feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Both play an important role in Wesleyan spirituality.

So Wesleyan spirituality makes the important contribution of providing an example for how to be faithful to both the Scriptural understanding of faith and works as well as loving God and our neighbor.

As people have looked at the details of the practice of Christian spirituality as practiced by John Wesley and the early Methodists, it seems to me that they typically react in one of a few different ways.

One possible reaction is to ridicule Wesley's spirituality as too uptight and obsessive about all the things that people need to do in order to be a Christian. This approach suggests that Wesley's standard is not only unreasonable, it is unnecessarily high. The important question to ask in light of this reaction is: Is Wesley's understanding of spirituality a faithful articulation of what we find in the Christian Scriptures? My argument this morning suggests that it is.

Another possible reaction is to have a sort of detached appreciation or admiration. This reaction acknowledges that Wesley was an amazing person, but that the way he lived just isn't possible in this day and age. This reaction basically says that Wesleyan spirituality is very faithful, but it is so faithful that it just really isn't realistic to expect anyone to actually live up to in this day and age. (Interestingly, this is the same reaction that most people have when they read the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, so I guess Wesley is in good company!) It seems to me to be an inadequate response to fault Wesley for taking Jesus' teachings too seriously. Instead, that would seem to indicate an unwillingness to be obedient to the teachings of Jesus that reveals a fault within us, rather than a legitimate fault with Wesley's spirituality.

This leads me then to the response that I would like to suggest is ultimately the most appropriate response, a response of awakening and repentance. This response

would be one of recognizing that there was value and power in what has happened before and a realization that we have wandered far away from it and settled for far less over the years. The ideal response, then, would be to turn away from nominal Christianity, humble ourselves and return to the Method behind Methodism, prayerfully asking God to bless what he has blessed before once again!

This leads me to the final contribution that I believe Wesleyan spirituality has to make to the contemporary church. I alluded to this at the end of the last section as I was discussing the early Methodist's practice of "watching over one another in love." I believe that this practice of watching over one another in love, or small group accountability, is the major contribution that Wesleyan spirituality has to make to United Methodism today. Small group accountability is the thread that ties all the pieces of Wesleyan spirituality together. Without the practice of meeting together in small groups, Methodists have tended to decrease in their zeal and determination to grow in their faith. In Wesley's lifetime, he found that when Methodists joined together and talked about their spiritual lives they consistently grew in their faith, and when they did not do this, they fell away from practicing their faith. And after Wesley's life, as Methodism continued, the decline of Methodism has been connected by some Methodist scholars to the removal of the class meeting as a requirement for membership in Methodist churches.

See, it used to be that being Methodist meant that you participated in the method of going to worship weekly, and meeting together weekly in a small group to talk about how you were practicing your faith through works of mercy and works of piety. In the small groups they also worked to stay connected to God's grace and remind each other that they could not do this on their own. Yet, gradually this method began to unravel so much so that we have come to a point where most Methodists think that nobody else has a right, or any business to ask them how they are doing spiritually. Nobody else has any business asking them if they are reading the Bible daily, praying, avoiding making excuses for going to worship, and the list could go on and on. In many ways, we have settled for a least common denominator faith where we don't want to risk offending anyone, or expecting too much. As a result, in many cases we have not offended people who call themselves Christians, but refuse to be obedient to the basic tenets of Christian faith enough, and we have not asked people to commit themselves in a mean-

ingful way to living out their faith. And so, I believe that small group accountability remains a major contribution that Wesleyan spirituality has to make to the contemporary United Methodist Church. But small group accountability is not merely having a Bible Study, or going through some other study. Instead, it involves actually talking to each other about where we are at in our walks with the Lord, asking each other if we are practicing our faith, are we moving closer to the presence of God, or farther away?

Wesley defined Methodists during his life as people who “unite together to encourage and help each other in ... working out [their] salvation, and for that end watch over one another in love.” This is a concept that many of us seem afraid of, or at least slow to embrace. But my question for us would be, why? Why wouldn't we want to be a people who are known for encouraging and helping each other to grow in their faith, to experience all the blessings that God has for their lives? I believe that this is a crucial contribution for the church today because we live in a time where people do not seem to need to hear the gospel, most non-Christians can tell you the basic message of Jesus' death for our sins, however, few people have seen the gospel lived. Wesleyan spirituality gives us a vision that is big enough to live into in order to witness to the world how great our God is and what kind of community is possible because of the amazing grace offered to all of us by the God we worship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Finally, I believe that if we embrace this vision we will remember that we don't need to reach out to others because we are tired, or because we are declining in numbers and we need new life in order to preserve our institutions, but because we really have something of infinite and eternal value. We have something that is good news, that we are the stewards of, and we will want to freely and boldly offer all of the world into our community, not because they have something that we need, but because of a deep conviction that we have something that they need in order to live life as God has intended for us to live. Living life to the fullness that God intended, is after all, what Wesleyan spirituality is all about!