

WHY METHODIST – WHY SERVANT EXPERIENCE: DOES MY EXPERIENCE TRUMP YOUR EXPERIENCE

Many have experienced a moment when the **Spirit of God** came upon them in a powerful way. For some, it happened on a retreat as a youth, or a **mission trip later in life**. Others had an experience during a Sunday morning worship service or a Wednesday night Bible study. Some have felt Christ especially present while praying from the top of a mountain or crying out over the sound of crashing waves while standing on a beach. Whatever the circumstances, these moments can be life changing. We look back upon them as times of **conversion**, renewal, and revelation. We may feel called to do something, experience **healing and wholeness**, or receive **peace about a decision**.

John Wesley, founder of **the Methodist movement**, rather famously had a Holy Spirit moment often referred to as his “**Aldersgate experience**.” Wesley records in his journal what happened on May 24, 1738:

*In the evening I went very unwillingly to a **society** in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading [Martin] 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.*

When read by itself, this one journal entry seems to suggest this God-moment happened unexpectedly. The same is true when we hear others report similar experiences. Most often, however, these special encounters with the Holy Spirit come to those who are seeking, those who have opened their hearts to receive something special from God.

A little background

When John Wesley and his brother Charles returned to England after their missionary journey to Georgia, their faith was a bit shaken. Their **American mission** didn’t live up to expectations.

During their travels, the brothers met **Moravian Christians** from Germany whose assurance of faith the Wesley brothers envied. In a storm at sea and during trying times on land, these Christians displayed a peace for which John and Charles longed. Upon their return to England—Charles in July 1736 and John in February 1738—they sought out the Moravians, hoping to discover the secret to their faith.

In May 1738, Charles fell ill and was concerned for his survival. Lying in bed day after day, he focused on his spiritual well-being. If this illness were to take his life, was he ready to die? He prayed, studied, and spoke to friends who prayed for him to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit.

At about the same time, John was having conversations with a well-respected Moravian name **Peter Böhler**. Böhler was teaching Wesley about Moravian spirituality, which included

the belief that Christians have an assurance of faith experienced as love, peace, and joy. Those emotions were in short supply for each of the Wesley brothers at the time. Between conversations, John pored through the Bible for evidence of Böhler's claims. Böhler had exhorted John Wesley, "Preach faith until you have it." John shared this admonition with Charles.

On **Pentecost Sunday**, May 21, 1738, something amazing happened. Between visits from his brother, John, his doctor, and those who were taking care of him, Charles had a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit.

In his journal entry for that day, he reports experiencing "a strange palpitation of heart" that caused him to exclaim, "I believe, I believe!" Several sentences later he continues, "I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ."

When John visited the next day, Charles shared what had happened for him and together they prayed for John to have a similar experience. Charles writes, "I almost believed the Holy Ghost was coming upon him."

Later that week, John "went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street" where his heart became "strangely warmed." It was a moment for which he had prayed, studied, and prepared.

The same is often true for us. While God can come to us at any time and any place, it is often helpful to prepare our hearts to be receptive to the Holy Spirit stirring within us. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Methodist Movement lived for 200 years out of this collective sense of experiential Christianity.

Throughout his ministry, John Wesley taught about the **means of grace**, things we do regularly to put ourselves in a place where we are open to receiving the grace of God. Those practices include individual and communal works of piety and works of mercy, like private devotions, sharing in the sacraments, visiting the sick, and standing up for justice.

As you and I long to hear from God, it is good to follow the examples of John and Charles and Susanna Wesley - who prayed, studied, and sought the counsel of others. We cannot control when or where God will speak to us—it often seems to happen unexpectedly—but we can put ourselves in a place where we will be ready to hear when it happens.

Susanna grew up in an era when it was quite common for even devoted Christians in various faith communities not to have an absolute assurance of their personal salvation. That was true of both Puritan Protestants (among whom she was raised) and of Anglicans (with whom she fellowshiped and served as an adult). Both Anglicans and Puritans taught salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. But there was also such a pronounced emphasis on living a life of good works that not a few professing believers mistakenly supposed their salvation was based at least

in part on their own good deeds. That mistaken belief couldn't help but leave many of them wondering if they were good enough to make it to heaven.

John and Charles Wesley were ordained ministers in the Church of England. In 1735 they came to America as missionaries in the Georgia Colony. John served as a chaplain and a missionary to the Indians while Charles was personal secretary to the founder of the Georgia Colony, General Oglethorpe. While in America the Wesley brothers had considerable contact with a group of German Moravian Christians who emphasized (1) salvation through faith in Christ alone and (2) having an assurance of one's salvation through the inner witness of God's Spirit.

After returning to England in 1738, both John and Charles had conversion experiences in which they firmly laid hold of the doctrine of justification by faith for themselves, and thereby gained a settled assurance that they were truly saved. They immediately set about zealously proclaiming those doctrines.

A significant spiritual event also took place in Susanna Wesley's life in January, 1740, at a communion service led by her son-in-law, Rev. Westley Hall. She afterward wrote of the incident: "While my son Hall was pronouncing these words in delivering the cup to me, 'The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee,' these words struck through my heart, and I knew that God for Christ's sake had forgiven me all my sins."

When Charles heard of this testimony, he wrote his mother a rather blunt letter in which he apparently declared that she had all along been trusting in her own good works to save her and had not been truly converted until that moment of realization during the recent communion service. But in answering his letter she referred back to a time during her teenage years when God had brought her through a period of serious doubting and had kept her Christian faith intact:

"I do not, I will not despair. For ever since my sad defection, when I was almost without hope, when I had forgotten God, yet I then found He had not forgotten me. Even then He did by His Spirit apply the merits of the great atonement to my soul, by telling me that Christ died for me. Shall the God of truth, the Almighty Savior, tell me that I am interested in [have a share in] His blood and righteousness, and shall I not believe Him? God forbid! I do, I will believe. And though I am the greatest of sinners, that does not discourage me. For all my transgressions are the sins of a finite person, but the merits of our Lord's sufferings and righteousness are infinite!"

Susanna recorded in her *Journal* these words: *When I had forgotten God, yet I then found He had not forgotten me. Even then He did by His Spirit apply the merits of the great atonement to my soul, by telling me that Christ died for me.*

Susanna's father, Samuel Annesley, was a prominent Nonconformist minister in London during her childhood and younger adult years. When she related to her son John the assurance that had recently come to her heart at the communion service, he queried her about Annesley:

Susanna's own assurance was in evidence at the time of her death on July 23, 1742. According to John, who was at her bedside when she passed into eternity, at that time she expressed 'no doubt or fear'. Her sole desire was 'to depart and to be with Christ' (Philippians 1:23). Such is the settled assurance of the Christian who has come to trust in Christ alone (rather than partly in one's own good works) for salvation.

The witness-experience of Susanna, John, and Charles continually references the Scripture passage, Romans 8:16 -- *The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are children of God*. John had been admonished by even his father, Samuel, on his death bed in 1735: "The inward witness, son, the inward witness, that is the strongest proof of Christianity."

When we were doing our book on *Wesley and the Quadrilateral* in 1997, we were faced head-on with the fact that modernity and secularity has totally shifted the playing field with regard to how experience is interpreted today – even among Church-going Christians. In a letter to the editor of the *United Methodist Reporter* from Dolores Klinsky Walker (2 August, 1996) we read these words: "Everyone interprets Scripture from his or her experience, study, and reason. Are we supposed to turn off our minds and let traditionalists think for us?"

Notice the stark dichotomy: Either we think for ourselves by relying on our individual experience and reason, or we submit ourselves to tradition. And the writer uses the words "tradition" and "reason" and "experience" as if their meanings are self-evident. [*Quadrilateral*, p. 107] But note that in all the references among the Wesley family members that there is both a salvation and doctrinal center to their references to the experience of the witness of the Spirit. The doctrinal center is the Holy Trinity: God the Father bears witness through the Holy Spirit to the efficacy of the saving work of Christ the Lord.

When we moderns shift "experience" to referencing our own personal perspectives on religious experience and how that effects what and how we believe, we have made a comprehensive category shift. Fundamentally, we have moved from the we-perspective of the historic faith community (the Church and the Great Tradition) to the my-myself-and I perspective on individualized experience. It is along these lines that 'my personal experience' can be used to trump your experience.

With regard to the Christian faith and the role of experience, it is critical to keep in mind the following: Christian faith is deeply personal, but that is not the same as individual. It is within this frame that the modern saying (having appeared only in the last 100 – 125 years), "Jesus Christ is my personal Lord and Savior.", can be especially dangerous. Unfortunately, that can

typically mean that my salvation is my individual experience. With the practical result that people compare their individual experiences. Indeed, so much of modern ‘contemporary’ worship is rooted in the comparative pleasure principle. Our worship is more exciting and fun than your church services, so you should come experience what we have to offer you.

Unfortunately, the same is true for conversion experiences. Oh so how many times have I heard statements like, “I never had a conversion like that! Leaves me wondering whether I am really a Christian.”

About 25 years ago, I began to teach my students along these lines: “The most important question about your conversion experience and faith is not, “If you died tonight, do you know that you would go to heaven.” Rather, the more immediately pressing question is, “If your live 20 more years, will you make any difference for God’s work in the world.”

The truncated view of the saving work of God in Christ is that it is eternal life insurance to protect against the fires of hell; however, when entering into a journey toward Christlikeness is our goal, we view evangelism differently.

Within the circle of the Great Tradition (Orthodoxy), experiencing God’s Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God leads to Orthopathy and Orthopraxy.

Right teaching/believing leads to right dispositions and to right Christian practices and discipleship that leads toward increasing Christlikeness. I like the way Hal Knight, The E. Stanley Jones Professor at St. Paul Seminary expresses it: *Orthopathy, then, does not mean everyone must experience certain feelings or have a specific religious experience. It means Christians have a character which consists of holy tempers such as love for God and neighbor, faith, hope, peace, humility, and other fruits of the Spirit—what Wesley calls in one sermon the “marks of the new birth.”*

It is as we participate in means of grace such as works of piety (prayer, searching the Scripture, the Lord’s Supper) and works of mercy (active love for neighbor) that the Holy Spirit transforms our lives. **Experiencing** such practices not only enables us to express our love for God and our neighbor, they are means that God uses to enable us to grow in love and Christlikeness. Through these “means of grace” we **experience** the distinctive identity and promises of God (orthodoxy) and live out our discipleship (orthopraxis). Through these together we receive a new disposition/mind: orthopathy.

This does not envision experiencing God as an alternative to having beliefs or practicing our faith. This rejects any attempt to define Christianity simply as having a particular religious experience, or believing a creed, or doing certain practices as if doing them constituted our salvation. Rather, we see these elements as integrated, used by God to enable us to grow in love, and to increasingly reflect the divine image in which we were created!