

PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL IN SRI LANKA: SOME LESSONS FROM THE METHODIST HERITAGE¹

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Abstract: *This article appeals to enduring significance of evangelism as a core tenet of the Methodist movement, rooted John Wesley's conviction regarding humanity's spiritual lostness and the redemptive efficacy of the gospel. The author recalls the historical context of early Methodist preaching and turns his attention to the contemporary landscape of evangelism in Sri Lanka with its own cultural nuances, socio-economic realities, and other religious traditions which present complex challenges to the church's mission. To navigate these complexities, the author proposes a multifaceted evangelistic strategy that integrates a solid theological framework with a commitment to social justice and meaningful engagement with diverse societal segments, including the business sector and intellectual communities. The article emphasizes the crucial role of small groups and the value of communal hymn-singing as a means of theological formation.*

Keywords: *John Wesley, Methodist movement, evangelism, class meetings, bands, hymns*

1. Passion for Evangelism

The primacy of evangelism in the Methodist movement is evidenced in what John Wesley (1703-1791) stated under the question: "What are the rules of a Helper?" His eleventh of twelve points is, "You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those that want you, but to those

1. This article was originally presented as a conference paper at the bicentennial of the Methodist Church Sri Lanka held in Moratuwa in October 2013.

that want you most.”² He went on to say, “Observe: It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society; but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord.” We know, of course, that helpers in the early Methodist movement were involved in doing many other things with Wesley’s approval. But the above statement gives an indication of the primacy of evangelism in the Methodist agenda.

One of the factors fuelling the passion for evangelism in Methodism was a sense of the lostness of people apart from Christ and the huge difference Christ makes in their lives. The urgency of Wesley’s appeal to people is heard in his sermon, ‘Awake, Thou that Sleepeth,’ in which he exhorted,

Awake, thou everlasting spirit, out of thy dream of worldly happiness! Did not God create thee for himself? Then thou canst not rest till thou retest in him. Return, thou wanderer! Fly back to thy ark. This is not thy home. Think not of building tabernacles here. Thou art but a stranger, a sojourner upon earth; a creature of a day, but just launching out into an unchangeable state. Make haste. Eternity is at hand. Eternity depends on this moment; an eternity of happiness or an eternity of misery!³

Another fuel to the passion for evangelism was the realisation that the gospel was the one way for a person to be saved. Wesley said, “The Son of God, who came from heaven, is here showing us the way to heaven; to the place

2. John Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and others from the 1744, to the year 1789,” *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. VIII, *Addresses, Essays, and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984 reprint from the 1872 edition), 310. Quotations from this fourteen-volume edition of *The Works of Wesley* will hereafter be referenced simply as *Works*.

3. Wesley, “Awake, Thou that Sleepeth,” Sermon III, *Works*, Vol. V, 29.

which he hath prepared for us; the glory he had before the world began. He is teaching us the true way to life everlasting; the royal way which leads to the kingdom; and the only true way,—for there is none besides; all other paths lead to destruction.”⁴ Wesleyan passion, then, comes from a realisation of the urgency of the gospel.⁵ Francis Asbury, whom John Wesley sent with Thomas Coke to start the Methodist movement in North America, wrote, “Preach as if you had seen heaven and its celestial inhabitants and had hovered over the bottomless pit and beheld the tortures and heard the groans of the damned.”⁶

We see this kind of passion in Paul’s attitude towards his fellow-Jews who had rejected the gospel: “... I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:1-3). There is a view among some theologians that God has one plan for the salvation of the nations and another for those who grew up among God’s covenant people (Jews and Christians). In this view unreached people will be saved without reference to the gospel. Contrary to that view, Paul is seen describing the pre-conversion state of the Gentile Ephesians as follows: “...you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12).

After a long argument in Romans 1-3 to demonstrate that “all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin” (Rom. 3:10), Paul says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The solution is to be “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ

4. Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” Sermon XXI, *Works*, Vol. V, 248.

5. On the passion for evangelism in Methodism, see, Robert E. Coleman, *Nothing to do But to Save Souls* (Nappance, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1990).

6. Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 785; cited in Robert E. Coleman, *The Heart of the Gospel: The Theology behind the Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 83.

Jesus..., to be received by faith" (3:24). Later he would argue that, in order to have this faith that saves, it is necessary for people to hear the gospel through a preacher who has been sent to them (10:9-15).

We rejoice that attitudes of superiority that Christians may have had about those of other faiths are generally condemned in the church today. We approach all people with humility and treat them with respect recognising the good that may be found in their beliefs and behaviour. But we live with the realisation that people are lost apart from Christ. That drives us to proactive evangelism even though this may run counter to the prevailing mood of religious pluralism that frowns upon the idea of people being converted through believing in the gospel.

Wesley was also driven by the realisation that the gospel must be taken to the whole world. His famous quotation "the world is my parish" became a rallying point for Methodist missions. When Dr. Thomas Coke (1747-1814) was dismissed from his duties as Anglican parish priest in South Petherton because of his Wesleyan leanings he is reported to have gone to John Wesley. He asked what he was to do now that he had neither parish nor church. Wesley, taking Coke's hand in his, replied, "Why, go and preach the gospel to all the world."⁷ He took those words to heart and later became the father of Methodist missions, ending his life on a ship carrying the first Methodist missionaries to Sri Lanka.

The words of W. E. Sangster, given at the World Methodist Conference of 1951, are as appropriate today as they were over half a century ago:

Are we failing this age... in not bringing that passion to religion which it surely requires? [Methodists] offer the world nothing new in doctrine... our *raison d'être* [reason for existence] wasn't in novelty of doctrine, but in the conviction and passion we brought to its proclamation. *Religion in earnest!* What has happened to that awful earnestness which

7. John Vickers, *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 131.

fired Wesley and Asbury; John Nelson and Caleb
Pedicord....⁸

John Wesley himself was an evangelist even before his Aldersgate experience. Following Peter Böhler's advice to him to preach faith until he got it, he did preach to a prisoner condemned to die and saw him go to the gallows with an assurance of salvation that he himself did not have!⁹ After Aldersgate, he kept a punishing preaching schedule and is reputed to have preached an average of two to three sermons a day for the next fifty-three years!¹⁰ Most of his published sermons served both the purposes of evangelism and nurture. With such a start from its founder, it is not surprising that evangelism would continue as a major feature of the life of the Methodist church.

2. The Evangelistic Message

2.1. Evangelism through power

The Methodist tradition of evangelism distinguished itself by its emphasis on the content of the gospel combined with a lively experiential element. The combination of warm heart and sound mind was seen in all its activities including its evangelism. Wesley was very much of an apologist arguing, in his sermons, for the truths he proclaimed and answering objections to these truths.¹¹ This was like the situation in the early church where the evangelistic sermons of Peter, Stephen and Paul in Acts were heavily doctrinal and apologetic in style. Interestingly in the early church the miracle workers were also apologists,

8. Frank Cumbers, editor, *Daily Readings from W. E. Sangster* (London: Epworth Press, 1966), 241. What we call the World Methodist Conference today was called the "Ecumenical Methodist Conference" in those days. This talk was given at the eighth such conference.

9. John Wesley, *Works*, Vol. I, *Journals*, No. I, 27 March 1738, 90.

10. Robert G. Tuttle, *On Giant Shoulders: The History, Role, and Influence of the Evangelist in the Movement Called Methodism* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984), 2.

11. ee John Sungschul Hong, *John Wesley: The Evangelist* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2006), chapter 12, "Apologetic Evangelism," 163-177.

a combination rarely found today.¹² But this was seen in Methodism, at least in the early stages of the revival where the preaching of the Word was accompanied by spectacular physical evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit as people came under the conviction of sin.

This combination of power and theological content has enormous implications for the church in Sri Lanka. Today many who have converted to Christianity in Sri Lanka have been attracted to the gospel through the demonstration of signs and wonders in answer to prayer. Sadly, the accompanying message which is preached often focusses primarily on the power of God and its ability to meet felt needs. There isn't the arguing for the truth of the gospel that was seen in Wesley's preaching. Certainly, Wesley's western linear logical style of argumentation may not be very effective in our eastern cultures. We must find culturally appropriate means of communication that our people use communicating truth. These means should work with the aim of helping persuade them to change their way of thinking to accommodate the Christian worldview. The verb "to persuade" (*peithō*), is used seven times in Acts to describe Paul's evangelism (17:4; 18:4; 19:8; 19:26; 26:28; 28:23, 24; cf. 2 Cor. 5:11).¹³ This use of *peithō* has been defined as "to convince someone to believe something and to act on the basis of what is recommended."¹⁴ People change their mind and align themselves with Christ. The key is to communicate the full Christian gospel which includes the creation, the fall, redemption and consummation through the work of Christ along with a kingdom-of-God understanding to life and to personal and social ethics.

Could evangelism in the Methodist Church demonstrate the possibility of combining these two aspects

12. See Ajith Fernando, *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 147, 248-249.

13. It appeared 6 times in Acts before chapter 17, but 17:4 is the first time it appears in connection with Paul's evangelism.

14. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, editors, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. Vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 423.

in our evangelistic strategy: arresting attention through demonstrating the power of God and persuasion through communicating the full content of the gospel? If the church does not fix this anomaly, soon we could have an influx of people into the church who do not understand what Christianity is all about. These people would have replaced their gods with the supreme, almighty God of the Christians without giving up their essentially magical understanding of deity. That view needs to be transformed to an approach that views God as holy-love and therefore as the One who seeks a relationship with us of adoption as his children and of submission to his lordship. This is a relationship that encompasses all of life.

2.2. Social concern and the evangelistic message

We also need to mention that the large majority of converts to Christianity in Sri Lanka in recent years have been from uneducated and economically poor backgrounds, resulting in the accusation that Christian evangelists are preying on the needs of people and bribing them into becoming Christians through the offering of allurements. As never before, the social ministries of the church need to be kept distinct from its evangelistic ministries, so that no connection is seen between the aid offered to non-Christians and the appeal to yield to the Lordship of Christ. People must be helped whether they become Christians or not. It would be better not to connect our evangelistic programmes with programmes of a humanitarian nature.

This is a difficult and somewhat unnatural distinction to maintain. In the Bible, social concern and evangelism are both presented as important segments of our mission; so, there is no theological basis for making such a sharp distinction between the two. But today in Sri Lanka we need to work hard at making this distinction because of the present hostile charges regarding evangelism and because of the attempts to make evangelism through “allurements” an illegal activity.

We also note that often the poor and hungry have lost a sense of pride in their self-worth and identity, including their religious identity. Therefore, changing religions for economic gain is very easy for them—too easy. This must make us cautious about giving people the impression that becoming Christians and receiving aid is the answer to overcoming their poverty. It is heartening to note in this regard that many of those who have converted to Christ from other faiths were previously devout adherents of their faith and that their conversion was the culmination of a quest for authentic spirituality. They did not come seeking material gain; they came seeking the Saviour of the world. I arrived at this conclusion after interviewing several first-generation Christians in Sri Lanka.

2.3. Evangelism among the business community

We are seeing some non-Christians from the business world in Sri Lanka converting to Christianity in the Charismatic churches, but not so much in the Methodist Church. I do not know whether a study has been done of the reasons for this. I have ministered often in these charismatic churches and have close connections with their leaders. I suspect that there are three reasons for this attraction. The first is the business style culture within these churches with a heavy emphasis on slick programming, high quality contemporary music, strategic planning, and ambitious vision-casting. This is an organisational culture that is much closer to the culture in the business world.

There are some obvious shortcomings in this approach to ecclesiastical culture as it seems to foster a consumerist approach to church-life. This runs counter to the biblical approach to community life which sees the church as a body and as a family. That requires long-term commitment as opposed to the present consumerist practice of church-hopping based on what each church has to offer.

However, this emphasis on quality and aggressive visionary programming is a challenge to us. The poor

quality of many Methodist programmes is, in my opinion, a great dishonour to God. Sadly, we do not seem to have a structure to call those responsible for poor quality to account. The newer churches have a more open-market, competitive approach to motivation which results in those who do not produce high quality work being penalised and deprived of promotions and of increased financial remuneration by pastoring in larger churches. I believe there are biblical grounds to support our ecclesiastical structures; however, without a burning passion for the glory of God, our structures could result in mediocre and low-quality programming. Passion is the biblical alternative to motivation via free market competition, and that, as we saw, is a key aspect of the Methodist heritage! How important it is for us to recover our burning passion.

A second reason why the newer churches are attracting people from the business world is the passionate concern members must witness to their friends in the business world. Their witness and concern often meet the felt need for a place of security amidst the stresses and other challenges faced in the business world. High quality programmes, as in the business world, are organised which present facets of Christian truth in ways that are relevant to businesspersons. There is much that we can learn from this emphasis on personal concern for and relevant witness to colleagues and of planning high quality programmes that attract people from the business world.

A third reason is the message proclaimed. There is much merit and biblical authenticity in the content of the evangelical message proclaimed in these churches. But there is also a danger. The prosperity gospel that is proclaimed in some churches is appealing to people who have already adopted a free market philosophy of life. In these churches there is a danger that other aspects of Christian discipleship, such as the essentiality of suffering and a commitment to justice, could be neglected. These topics could turn off visitors from the business world. But to present this lopsided gospel is dangerous because people could be attracted to Christianity without realising that

following Christ includes suffering and a commitment to justice. So, we may find Christians who are active in their churches but whose business establishments are guilty of under-paying workers, of adopting unethical advertising methods and of exploiting the poor and needy.

When Paul spoke to the Athenians he said, “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26). This idea of the entire human race coming out of one stock ran counter to the belief of the Athenians who prided themselves as having come from a separate stock to others.¹⁵ Paul was not afraid to attack this prejudice in his evangelistic message even though this could have a hostile reception from his hearers. The Methodist movement has always been committed to justice. And this commitment should be expressed in its evangelistic proclamation also. The American pastor-theologian James Montgomery Boice has been credited with the statement that what you win them *by* you win them *to*. An evangelistic message without a justice element can result in Christians who condone injustice.

2.4. Evangelism among intellectuals

The failure to make a significant evangelistic impact upon intellectual non-Christians is a glaring fact about the church in Sri Lanka today. The religions of Sri Lanka have a strong intellectual heritage which must not be ignored by the church. Possibly the forms of evangelism commonly used in the church today are not very effective with intellectuals. Perhaps we need a contemporary equivalent to the Methodist Evangelist E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973) who was able to win a hearing among the intellectuals of India. He would give “Christ- and gospel-centered lecture-sermons on current topics... in hired public halls... mostly for non-Christians, under the chairmanship of some local

15. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, Revised Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 337.

leader.”¹⁶ The meetings did not have the usual trappings of an evangelistic meeting (such as prayer and songs of praise and proclamation). After the meetings, there would be “gruelling question periods.”¹⁷ In connection with these meetings or independent of them Jones would organise round table conferences where people were able to dialogue on matters of faith and life. This approach is well expressed in his Jones’ book *Christ at the Round Table*.¹⁸

Jones was following the method used by Paul when ministering among the intellectual Athenians. Paul “reasoned [or dialogued; Gk. *dielegeto*] in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there” (Act 17:17). While Paul dialogued with the people, he did not compromise on the radical nature of the call of God and on the uniqueness of Christ. He boldly proclaimed these in his address at the Areopagus and lost some of his audience as a result (Acts 17:31-32). Some who have emphasised the need for dialogue today have jettisoned their belief in the absolute uniqueness of Christ. This was not so for Jones who, to the end, presented Christ as supreme and taught the need for conversion.¹⁹ As far as I know, Wesley did not participate in formal verbal dialogues like Jones. But his sermons, letters and articles show that he engaged those who had views different to his and sought to respond to them biblically.

Sri Lanka needs more evangelists in the mould of

16. James K. Mathews, “Jones, Eli Stanley,” *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, Scott W. Sunquist, editor (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 424.

17. James K. Mathews, “E(li) Stanley Jones,” *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, Gerald H. Anderson, editor, (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 339.

18. See E. Stanley Jones, *Christ at the Round Table* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928). On the contribution of Jones, see Richard W. Taylor, *The Contribution of E. Stanley Jones* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1973) and Richard W. Taylor, “E. Stanley Jones, 1884-1973, Following the Christ of the Indian Road,” *Mission Legacies: Biographical Studies of Leaders of the Modern Missionary Movement*, Gerald Anderson, et. al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 339-347.

19. E. Stanley Jones, *Conversion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959).

Stanley Jones. May leaders within the Methodist Church encourage and nurture those who may have gifts suited for this work. In addition, every Methodist leader should be asking how they could effectively answer the queries of our nation's intellectuals. It is interesting to note that a description of the ministry of Stanley Jones by his son-in-law Bishop James K. Mathews (1913-2010), says that he "wrestled with the problem of human suffering."²⁰ He even wrote a book on it.²¹ Given how important this issue is to the Buddhists, anyone doing evangelism among intellectuals in Sri Lanka should also give serious thought to this issue.

3. Nurturing New Believers: "The Chief Care"

Less than five years after his Aldersgate experience, Wesley records in his journal about how many who professed faith have fallen away. Then he describes the danger of people being allowed to fall away without proper nurture: "From the terrible instances I met with here, (and indeed in all parts of England,) I am more and more convinced, that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place should be half-awakened, and then left to themselves to fall asleep again." This is followed by his famous statement: "*Therefore I determine, by the grace of God, not to strike one stroke in any place where I cannot follow the blow.*"²² Wesley described the nurture of new believers as "the chief care." He says, "We must build with one hand, while we fight with the other. And this is the great work, not only to bring souls to believe in Christ, but to build them up in our most holy faith. How grievously are they mistaken who imagine that, as soon as the children are born, they need take no more care of them! We do not find it so. *The chief care then begins.*"²³

20. Mathews, *Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, 425.

21. E. Stanley Jones, *Christ and Human Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1933).

22. Wesley, *Works*, Vol. I, *Journals*, No. V, 13 March 1743, 416 (italics ours).

23. Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XIII, *Letters*, DCCIV, 23 (italics ours).

Like in Wesley's time, many of those who have joined the church in Sri Lanka are from economically and educationally deprived backgrounds. There are two aspects of Wesley's system of nurturing new believers which I believe are especially relevant to our church. They are Wesley's system of small groups and the use of hymns for teaching doctrine.

3.1. Class Meetings and Bands²⁴

Though there have been a lot of people who have entered the church from other faiths, developing Christian values among new believers has been a challenge for all churches doing evangelism among people of other faiths. For example, though Christianity teaches that believers do not lie, many do! This is a carry-over from their previous life where, even though they would daily recite that they will abstain from lying, lying is very much part of the Sri Lankan culture. This has forged an attitude that, though the holy books should be revered and defended, they cannot be practiced. Therefore, converts come to the church with a worldview that says that one does not have to practice all the ethical teachings of the scriptures.

We need to develop an approach that looks to the teachings of the Bible with a desire to obey and with a belief that obedience is possible and mandatory. As Wesley said, "God's design in raising up preachers called Methodists" was "Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."²⁵ It should come as no surprise that the Methodist movement was soon called "the Holiness Movement."

24. Much of the material here is from my article, "Wesley's Small Groups as Keys to Nurturing Godliness among Converts from Economically Poorer Backgrounds, A Case Study from Sri Lanka" in Darrell L. Whiteman and Gerald H. Anderson, Editors, *World Mission in the Wesleyan Spirit*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 44 (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 2009), 235-243.

25. Wesley, *Works, Addresses, Essays, and Letters*, vol. 8, 299.

The situation is complicated in Sri Lanka because generally right and wrong are evaluated based on whether a given action produces shame or honour within the community rather than whether it makes one guilty before a holy God. The guilt orientation gives a more *personal* awareness of sin which acts as an incentive to holiness. Shame and honour are more *community-oriented* values. The Bible is alert to this issue as the cultures to which it was written were also shame-and-honour oriented.²⁶

I believe that Wesley's system of four interlocking groups will help in the nurturing of holy believers in a culture like ours. I have found the description of these groups by Michael Henderson helpful.²⁷

The first group is *the society* that met on Sunday. Henderson describes this as operating in the *cognitive mode*. The preaching/teaching of the Word took place weekly in the society meeting.

The second group is *the class meeting*. This was a heterogeneous group consisting of men and women, young and old, and rich and poor members usually from the same geographical area. This operated in what Henderson calls the *behavioural mode* and there the truths of scripture were applied to daily life.

Even today, when members are actively involved in discussing the implications of scripture for daily life in a small group setting, there is a greater chance of Christian values being internalised than through a traditional talk. As the truth is internalised, new criteria for shame and honour

26. For a description of shame-honour cultures and their relationship to the Bible see Joseph Plevnik, "Honor/Shame," *Biblical Social Values and their Meanings*, edited by John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 95-104; Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 27-57; Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (Xlibris, 2000). Timothy F. Tennant, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 77-101; and Hannes Wiher, *Shame and Guilt: A Key to Cross-Cultural Ministry*. Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2003.

27. D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997).

could be forged within the church community. In this way scriptural values, such as truthfulness in conversation, are encouraged through truthfulness becoming an honourable value and lying becoming a shameful value. Paul adopted this approach often when pushing for Christian values. He presented different behaviours as honourable or shameful. He said that sexual sin “*must not even be named* among you as *is proper* among the saints” (Eph. 5:3); that filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking was “*out of place*” (Eph. 5:4); and that “*it is shameful* to even speak about things they do in secret” (Eph. 5:12). When rebuking the Corinthians for unholy behaviour, he said, “I say this to *your shame*” (1 Cor. 15:34; see also 2 Thess. 3:14). In all these cases Paul was forging community values using honour and shame to foster holiness.

Many of today’s small groups do not really grapple with the text of scripture and with how to apply it to daily life. Usually, today’s meetings have times of praise (called “worship”), testimony, praying for the needs of people and a short “devotional.” We are missing a good opportunity to foster holy living among Christians. We would do well to return to Wesley’s approach to small groups as aimed at bringing behavioural changes through applying the scriptures.

Wesley’s third group was *the band*. Henderson describes it as belonging to the *affective mode*.²⁸ (The fourth group *the specialised band*, for groups like backsliders and recovering alcoholics, will not be considered here as it does not apply directly to this paper. Henderson calls this as belonging to the *rehabilitative mode*. It could be considered a precursor to modern group therapy). Wesley’s “Rules of the Bands” begin with the words: “The design of our meeting is to obey the command of God, ‘Confess your faults to one another, and pray for one another that ye may be healed’ (Jas. 5:16).”²⁹ Wesley recommends questions to ask about the personal life. This was what we today call a personal accountability group. So, the band was a homogenous group

28. Ibid., 112.

29. Ibid., 117.

consisting of the same kind of people—young men, or young women, or adult men, or adult women etc.

For three decades, I have been preaching about the need for Christian leaders to have these kinds of accountability relationships and I have even written a book trying to apply Wesley's system of friendships to today's world.³⁰ The constant response I get from leaders is that they cannot trust people enough to talk to them about their weaknesses and sins. Many describe how they have tried to do this and got hurt through the betrayal of trust. I am convinced that we need to create a new culture where people will trust each other so as to be willing to be vulnerable before them.

For such a culture we need a fresh understanding of grace. Grace tells us that we are all sinners, but that God has done all that is necessary for our sins to be forgiven and forgotten. If we have such a strong sense of grace, we would not be afraid to bring up our sins before trusted people. Those who hear of such sins would not go gossiping about them because they themselves know that their own identity in Christ is only because of grace that was showered upon them despite their sinfulness. For a forgiven sinner to gossip about the sins of others would be the height of hypocrisy. When a person with the grace perspective looks at the failings of another Christian, his or her main concern is, "How can I help this person recover from this?" This grace perspective pervades the New Testament which is unafraid to highlight the sins and weaknesses of the key leaders of the early church.³¹ Only Jesus is presented as being without sin. Biblical Christians are afraid of sin, but not afraid to accept that they have sinned, because they believe that grace is able to heal them after sin.

In a church where there is a corporate quest for applying the scriptures and where there is a mutual up-

30. Ajith Fernando, *Reclaiming Friendship: Relating to Each other in a Frenzied World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

31. See Ajith Fernando, *Jesus Driven Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 134-152

building of Christians through accountability we can achieve the kind of attitudes that will nurture holy people who follow the scriptures in their daily lives. Shame and honour cultures have a strong sense of community solidarity. But that does not usually extend to spiritual accountability for one's personal behaviour. Modern-day equivalents of class meetings and bands can help foster such spiritual accountability.

My ministry in Youth for Christ and at the Nugegoda Methodist Church has been primarily with first generation Christians who are relatively new converts. It has become clear from this experience that those who grew to biblical maturity are those who belonged to a Bible study group and submitted to spiritual accountability. There is a great need for the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka to recover this vital aspect of our heritage if we wish for our evangelism to be truly biblical.

3.2. Hymns as a means of evangelism and nurture

A second distinctive of the nurture of new believers among the early Methodists that I want to discuss was their use of hymns to teach the doctrines of the church. Charles Wallace says that "field preaching and hymn-singing" are "arguably the best known and most important of the Methodist revival's contributions to the wider church."³² Hymn singing was so much a part of the Methodist revival that some Methodist Hymn books began with the statement, "Methodism was born in Song,"³³ a sentiment also expressed in the official British Methodist website.³⁴ There is a significant fact about this that is stated in an influential book on English hymnody written almost a

32. Charles B. Wallace Jr., "Wesley as Revivalist/Renewal Leader," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* edited by Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 91

33. *The Methodist Hymn Book* (London: The Methodist Publishing House, 1933), v.

34. <http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/what-is-distinctive-about-methodism/born-in-song>

century ago. Louis Benson says that the Methodist hymns were “the result of the Revival experiences with the poor and unlettered.”³⁵ The early Methodist leaders realised that with poorer, semiliterate people, hymns were a good way to communicate gospel truth and Christian doctrine. Many people from similar backgrounds are coming to Christ in Sri Lanka in the Methodist Church and other churches. So hymns could be a key to proclaiming the gospel and to nurturing new believers in Sri Lanka also.

In his Preface to his hymn book published in 1780 Wesley said, “The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So that this book is in effect *a little body of experimental and practical divinity*.”³⁶ It was a book of theology. This kind of topical arrangement of hymns was a new development in English hymnody, though around the same time Evangelical Anglicans John Newton (1725-1807) and William Cowper (1731-1800) also published a topically arranged hymnbook called *Olney Hymns*.³⁷ As Beckerlegge says, “By means of the hymns the Methodist people were not only brought to religious convictions: they came to understand their Bibles better, a secure foundation of evangelical theology was laid in their minds, and they were built up in the Christian faith.”³⁸ In other words, hymns were tools in evangelism among unbelievers and in the nurture of new believers. They were able to take Christian beliefs to the heart of an individual. Wesley said, “Singing is as much the language

35. Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 248; cited by Oliver A. Beckerlegge, in the “Introduction” to the Bicentennial edition of *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of The People Called Methodists*, edited by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Nashville: Abingdon Press, originally published in 1983 by Oxford University Press), 62. This edition will hereinafter be referred to as the Bicentennial edition.

36. Wesley in *Works*, vol. 7, *Hymns*, Bicentennial edition, 74 (italics ours).

37. Beckerlegge, in the “Introduction” to *Works* vol. 7, Bicentennial edition, 27.

38. *Ibid.*, 61-62.

of holy joy, as praying is of holy desire.”³⁹ He knew that the experience of singing would be a good way for people to learn and remember doctrines. Many of them were not educated or literate, so they would find it difficult to learn doctrine through the more traditional types of formal education.

Up to this point, congregational singing was not common in the Church of England. It was the Methodists, the Congregationalist Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and the Moravians who popularised congregational singing.⁴⁰ Karen Westerfield Tucker says, “The catechetical and evangelical functions of the hymn texts were aided by familiar tunes or new tunes in current styles.”⁴¹ Musicologist, Donald Hustad says, “The Wesleys must be credited with rescuing hymn singing from the bondage of the two-line meters—common long and short. Their sources were the newer psalm tunes, opera melodies, and folk songs of German origin.”⁴² They used popular melodies. The genius of Christianity is its ability to make people of any culture at home in the church by adapting the practice of Christianity to the culture of the people. Therefore, our worship takes forms which are close to the people so that they can worship with their heart.

Wesley disliked complicated tunes which were artistically advanced but made the words difficult to understand. One out of many references in his journal about this will suffice: “A long anthem was sung; but I suppose none beside the singers could understand one word of it. Is not that ‘praying in an unknown tongue?’ I could no more bear it in any church of mine, than Latin prayers.”⁴³

39. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, 248). (Bristol: William Pine, 1765), 248; on Exod. 15:1 (from the electronic edition).

40. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, “Wesley’s Emphasis on Worship and the Means of Grace,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 231.

41. *Ibid.*, 232.

42. Donald P. Hustad, “Music in the Modern Revivalist Tradition,” *Music and Arts in Christian Worship, The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1994), 229.

43. *Works* Vol. IV, Journal, March 19, 1778, 116; see also *Ibid.*, April 8, 1787, 367; *Ibid.*, Jan. 25, 1781, 196;

As Tucker explains, “Nothing was to compromise the clear expression and hearing of the text.”⁴⁴

There is a lesson here for the church in Sri Lanka. We must have hymns presenting our theology that can be sung in tunes that our people find easy to sing. The third and fourth generation Christians in our churches are comfortable with singing translated hymns with western tunes, but the newer converts struggle to sing them meaningfully. There is a need for fresh translations of our classic hymns and of fresh compositions of hymns communicating our doctrines. And the tunes used for these need not be in the typical western meter but tunes that are more in keeping with contemporary local tastes. Recently we have seen some such Sinhala hymns emerge that present the doctrines of creation, the power of God, incarnation and redemption. But there are too few that teach on subjects like scriptural holiness, pilgrimage, engagement in mission and in society, and eschatology. I think Tamil hymnody is more advanced in this area. The challenge is to organise our services and meetings so as to consciously use the singing to impart Christian theology. I believe a one or two sentence introduction is all that may be needed to get the people doctrinally oriented to reap a doctrinal harvest from the song. The worship service must not only be culturally relevant, but it must also be the result of serious theological thinking by those preparing it.

Wesley wanted all Methodists to sing in church and at home. He says that his collection of hymns published in 1780 was done in such a way that it would “neither... be cumbersome nor expensive”⁴⁵ so that individual Methodists could purchase a copy. Today’s use of PowerPoint and overhead projectors may result in people not being familiar with the hymnbook. We should encourage the people to have a personal hymnbook at home and to use it regularly. In my travels, one book I always take with me is my British Methodist hymnbook to use in my personal devotions (even though I cannot use this hymnbook in my ministry

44. Tucker, “Wesley’s Emphasis,” 233.

45. Wesley, *Hymns*, 73.

with Sinhala speaking people). It has been said that in those days “Methodist homes could be identified by the sound of singing.”⁴⁶

Karen Tucker points out that “John Wesley was insistent that singing in worship was to be done by the entire congregation.”⁴⁷ So in his “Directions for Singing” issued in 1761, he urges the people to “Learn these tunes” and “Sing them *exactly*.”⁴⁸ He did not want the people to struggle with an unfamiliar tune during worship. In keeping with this idea, if I am using a new tune at a worship service, I usually rehearse it with the congregation just before the service. Interestingly, “Wesley vehemently rejected for Methodist worship the use of choirs and choral anthems—what was then common practice in the Church of England.”⁴⁹ This is because such practices took the focus in singing away from the congregation to a special group of people.

Wesley also directed Methodists to “sing *lustily* and with a good courage.” So that all may sing with fervour, he did not want some to “bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation.” He felt that this would detract from the “harmony” in which the whole congregation makes “one clear melodious sound.”⁵⁰ This too is very relevant today. When contemporary so-called “worship songs” are sung, often the musical instruments and the voices of the worship leaders are so loud that they drown out the singing of the congregation. That could lull the worshippers to an unhelpful passivity. This way, we may miss the benefit of the congregation effectively learning theology through active involvement in singing hymns.

Today’s “worship revolution” has brought in much vibrancy and freedom in worship to Christians. But it may be missing the opportunity to teach a theologically

46. Coleman, *Nothing to do But to Save Souls*, 28

47. Tucker, “Wesley’s Emphasis,” 232.

48. “Wesley’s Directions for Singing,” 1761; reprinted in Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7 *Hymns*, Bicentennial edition, 765 (italics his).

49. Tucker, “Wesley’s Emphasis,” 232.

50. “Wesley’s Directions,” 765.

starved people the great doctrines of the church. A return to using hymns as a means of theological instruction may help give vitally needed nourishment to the people and help stabilise those who have recently come to Christ. But if this is to happen, we will have to set about the task with the same creativity and commitment that the early Methodist movement did. We will have to look for ways of singing that are so culturally close to our people so that they could, as Wesley once said, “sing with the spirit and the understanding also.”⁵¹ It is my firm belief that we need to do some serious thinking about the use of hymns in worship in the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka today.

4. Conclusion

The following main affirmations and proposals are commended to the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka.

Firstly, passion was a major characteristic of Methodism and was fuelled by a realisation of the lostness of people apart from Christ and a confidence in the gospel as the answer to human need. We must recapture that vision.

Secondly, our evangelism needs to include both the demonstration of the power of God through prayer and the persuasion of people to accept the full Christian gospel through content-oriented communication.

Thirdly, we must be careful not to give the impression that our evangelism includes material incentives that allure people to become Christians.

Fourthly, we are rebuked by our lack of high-quality programming that has resulted in relatively less outsiders from the business world coming to our churches. While developing high quality programmes and a passion for businesspeople, we must not neglect the justice elements of the Christian message which challenge many in the business world.

Fifthly, the church is insufficiently engaging the intellectuals of our nation. We need to look for people

51. Wesley, *Works*, Vol. III, *Journals*, No. XV, 10 Aug. 1768, 339.

and models to do so and all Christian leaders need to acquaint themselves with the issues relating to evangelising intellectuals.

Sixthly, in our shame-and-honour oriented culture, biblical truth could be internalised and new criteria for shame and honour could be forged through the application of scripture to daily life in our small groups (class meetings) and accountability groups (bands). This will nurture mature and holy people in the church.

Seventhly, we should explore new ways of using hymns to teach doctrine and nurture believers. We need to develop doctrinally loaded hymns with tunes that our people find easy to sing. The way we lead worship should encourage the congregation to sing without undue focus coming on the team that is leading worship.