

Disciplined Life of John Wesley and the Life of Ministers in the 21st Century

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Abstract: Any leader who lacks discipline will hardly impact the lives of others. One of the highly revered and reputable Preachers and leaders is John Wesley who was born in 1703 in Epworth England and died 1791 at age 88. His activities and leadership role upheld Holy Club and Methodist movement in 18th century. This paper looks at the various aspects of his life in which discipline had been strongly established. He was a disciplined man in meditation in the word of God at all times. His prayer and fasting life demonstrated how disciplined he was. He was simple, compassionate and ready to give to the less privileged which include widows, motherless, fatherless and orphans. Other areas of his disciplined life could be seen in reading, writing, trekking, drinking and worship. This is seen as a lifestyle worthy of emulation by present age ministers and indeed all Christians.

Key words: Disciplined life, John Wesley, Meditation, Reading, Doing good and Prayer.

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I. INTRODUCTION

John Wesley was born on 19th June 1703 in Epworth England. The fifteenth of the nineteen children of Samuel and Susannah Wesley, he went to Oxford University where he read logic and theology, and ordained in 1725. He led the Holy Club in Oxford University for many years. He had his real spiritual encounter and conversion on 24th May, 1738, which is called Aldersgate experience. His proposal to marry Sophia in Georgia failed. Hence he married much later out of pity to a nurse widow, mother of four, Mary Versalie in 1751. Unfortunately the marriage also failed due to lack of satisfaction, no issue and the women packed out. Be that as it may he contributed greatly to the doctrinal development of the church. He eventually died in 1791 at age 88.

John Wesley is seen as a disciplined man who was able to balance his life and ministry and has become mentor and worthy of emulation to many ministers of the gospel. Because of his disciplined life both spiritually and physically. John Wesley has become a model for others to emulate, and indeed, he has set a pattern for Christians of this generation to follow when it comes to how one can manage his/her affairs as a Christian in a world of moral decadence and spiritual ineptitude. This paper therefore, discusses some of John Wesley's lifestyle as a disciplined minister of the gospel, in comparison with spiritual and physical discipline as its obtainable in today's various Christian denominations.

John Wesley emphasized "grace" through which we can live disciplined life and earn our salvation, this invariably does help to keep us on track and helps us to grow in the same grace as we journey towards Christian Perfection – not sitting around waiting for God to "grace" us but rather seeking after God for his grace¹. Essentially, this Means of Grace that Wesley speaks actually helped him in his Spiritual Discipline. He also encouraged ministers and indeed all Christians to emulate.

John Wesley was greatly influenced first by his mother Susannah Wesley. She believed that for a child to grow into a self-discipline child. To her, the stubborn flesh was the hardest for Christians to fight, and Godly parents would do well to equip their children to overcome it early.

She writes, "*When the will of a child is totally subdued, and it is brought to revere and stand in awe of the parents, then a great many childish follies may be passed by. I insist on the conquering of the will of children because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education when this is thoroughly done, then a child is capable of being governed by reason and piety*". The Mother was also a Puritan, this also

¹ John Wesley, "The Works of John Wesley" 3rd ed. Vol.6. (Kansas city: Beacon Hill PRESS, 1986) P51

contributed to the strict disciplined life of John Wesley. It is also important to state here also the ministerial life and discipline of his father "Samuel Wesley" in the church of England Anglican Communion also influenced him.

II. SOME OF JOHN WESLEY'S DISCIPLINED LIFESTYLE

1. MEDITATION

Listed as an essential for holiness, meditation made Wesley's life of necessity disciplined "Many Christians today have been robbed of the practice of Christian meditation due to their popularity and much engagement or laziness. In Wesleyan tradition, meditation is unique and important. It certainly has nothing to do with emptying the mind to let it be filled with whatever chaos blows into it For Wesley, meditation has a strong rational flavor and was more associated with reading the Bible meditatively with prayer². In one of his writings Wesley "instructed", 'We learn to think by reading the Bible and meditating on what we have read.'" As strong as Wesley was in writing so he was also in piety. "John Wesley meditated a lot during his life time, outcome of which were development of spiritual and doctrinal issues.

2. PRAYER

The habit of prayer is considered a strong weapon a believer can use to overcome the evil of this world. John Wesley is considered one of such men who spent several hours on their knees in prayer. The practice of personal prayer and meditation, according to John Wesley, is as important as that of public prayer. This is essential for a holy life. Wesley says this practice should include "public prayer, family prayer, and praying in our closet," His letters brought out more directions for prayer. "Tell Him simply all you fear, all you feel, all you want.... Pour out your soul and freely talk to God.... Pray just as you are led.... in all simplicity." Beyond these prayers which are more extemporaneous. Wesley 'taught his people to use..... written prayers from the Bible and The Book of Common Prayer. Wesley wrote prayers for worship, for daily devotions, for families, and prayers for children.'" The Covenant Prayer "I am no longer my own but thine" was composed by John Wesley. He started to pray 4 hours daily and graduated to 8 hours daily before his death. It takes a disciplined life to have such hours devoted to prayer.

3. FASTING

Fasting is the Christian practice of abstinence from food and some pleasures of life for a period of time to seek the face of the Lord. This practice which has a prominent place in the scriptures, is not only observed as a tradition, but prescribed by Jesus Christ as a means through which the believers can be empowered to heal certain diseases. Again, Wesley declares fasting as essential for full sanctification, "using such a measure of fasting or abstinence as our bodily health allows.' Tracy quotes Wesley, 'When you seek God with fasting added to prayer, you cannot seek His face in vain.....'³. He could fast at least two times a week. This is nothing but discipline.

4. GIVING TO THE POOR

John Wesley was said to have given about eighty per cent of all his earnings to help the poor and needy. At every point that he had an increment in his earning, rather than increasing his personal spending, he increased the amount he gives out to help those who are in need in one way or the other. Above all, Wesley gives many examples of 'works of mercy' which should be practiced as part of our Christian virtues. Elsewhere, he agrees with the author of James when he states, 'We do not....acknowledge him to have one grain of faith who is not continually doing good, who is not willing to 'spend and be spent in doing all good as he has opportunity, to all men.'" In fact, according to Tracy "this theme comes up hundreds of times in Wesley's writings. Christian service, in the Wesleyan tradition, is an integral part of spiritual formation.' He gave to widows, motherless, fatherless and orphan. He built orphanages and homes where such people were kept and cared for. This is another height of discipline.

5. ATTENDANCE AT WORSHIP

John Wesley attended and urges his followers to attend public prayer and receiving the Lord's Supper as both elements of worship. In other places, he requires weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. Both John and Charles Wesley focused on worship as an opportunity for spiritual growth of believers. The hundred of hymns they wrote show the emphasis they put on worship and correct theology in hymnody as well as Wesley's

² Wesley D. Tracy, 'Embrace Your Heritage. Spiritual Formation in Wesleyan Tradition'
<https://www.nph.com/vcmedia> (Accessed 9 April. 2006)

³ Wesley D. Tracy, 'John Wesley. Spiritual Director, Spiritual Guidance in Wesley's Letters' Wesleyan Theological Journal. Vol 23, No. 1 & 2, Spring-Full, 1988, 148-162

instructions on liturgies for worship. He seeks to ensure meaningful and spirit-filled worship services⁴. That was the watchword of John Wesley.

6. SIMPLICITY

It is important to state that John Wesley dedicated his life to be simple in all things. In ‘The Witness of Our Own Spirit,’ Wesley, drawing from the words of Jesus, says; We have had our’ whole conversion . ‘First, is simplicity. The light of the body, ‘said he ‘is the eye. If therefore thine eye be single, the whole body shall be full of light.’

The meaning whereof is this: If this eye of thy soul be single, all thy actions and conversations shall be “full of light.” That is the light of heavens, of love and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. We are then simple in our heart, when the eye of our mind is singly fixed on God, when in all things we aim at God alone, as our God, our portion, our strength, our happiness, our exceeding great reward, our all, even now and in eternity. This is simplicity; when a steady, view, a single intention of promoting his glory of doing and suffering his blessed will, runs through our whole soul, fills all our heart, and is the constant spring of all our thought, desires, and purposes. According to Sharon Delgado, ‘for John Wesley, simplicity was one aspect of ‘holiness of heart and life, ‘ He centered his life in prayer, wore plain clothes and fasted twice a week. Wesley earned considerable sums from his writings, but throughout his life he lived on 28 pounds per year, just as he had in his student days. He distributed the rest to the poor, and urged others to do the same.’⁵

7. DISCIPLINE IN READING

John Wesley was an ardent reader of the Bible. He was called Bible worm, He also read Bible commentaries, and other Christian literatures. He made this a daily practice of spending lots of his time reading, and this also played a major role in preparing him for his numerous write ups and publications which he also gave out to the poor masses to enhanced them educationally and spiritually. “Searching the scriptures, by hearing, reading, meditating” is Wesley’s advice. But he goes on in letters ‘to preacher John Temnath.....’whether you like it or not, read and pray daily....else you will be a trifler all your days, and a.....superficial preacher.’ Mrs. Woodhouse said to ‘stir up the gift of God is by reading, by meditation, and by private prayer. Hence it is always good to use all available opportunities for.....reading and meditation. ‘ Martha Chapman advised, ‘ Read a little, pray, and meditate much.

His reading life was a principle which in today’s world have not been given such recognition because of technological advancement, which has provided pastors and Christians alike with an alternative to a reading culture. However, as a result of John Wesley’s reading habit, he was able to make massive theological contributions to Christendom. Most of his theological postulation are still being used as point of references today.

8. COMMITTED TO WRITING

To write is not easy, but John Wesley was so much committed to writing his journal on daily basis. Hence, we have John Wesley’s journal as a book today. He also wrote a lot of sermons that eventually developed to what we have today as doctrinal documents and forty-four sermons of John Wesley. We also have his explanation on the sermon on the Mount. As part of his commitment to writing, he composed some hymns which we still have as our legacy till today.

9. TREKING DISTANCE ON THE ACCOUNT OF THE GOSPEL

John Wesley was so much committed to trekking from place to place, preaching house to preaching house, for the purpose of reaching the unreached, preaching the gospel from time to time, thereby populating the kingdom of God and de-populating the kingdom of Satan. He was a disciplined man.

10. DISCIPLINED IN THE AREA OF DRINKING

As much as the fund and freedom were there for him to indulge in alcoholic. John Wesley abstained himself from drinking liquor. He even taught his followers not to sell and discouraged them in using alcohol to entertain visitors. Hence it was captioned this way. “Don’t drink, don’t sell, don’t entertain people with it”. It takes a disciplined life to have such abstinence.

⁴ Foster Richard J. Richard Foster, ‘Study Guide for Celebration of Discipline’. San Francisca Harper & Row Publishers 1978. P.68

⁵ Sharon Delgado. ‘Simplicity’ <https://www.sharondelgado.or/selected-writings>. (Accessed 10 April 2016)

11. HE WAS COMMITTED TO DOING GOOD

Another area we must not overlook in the area of discipline life of John Wesley was his commitment to doing good to all and sundry. He did all the good he can, to all the people he can, at all the times he can, in all the places he can, as long as ever he can. Devil will not want you doing good, it takes great commitment to do it.

III. COMPARISON BETWEEN JOHN WESLEY'S DISCIPLINED LIFESTYLE AND THAT OF MINISTERS

From our finding, we discovered a sharp contrast between John Wesley's disciplined lifestyle as against what is obtainable in the present day Church, especially among the ministers and indeed some of the members. First, the practice of daily meditation on the word of God has been systematically eroded by the 'busy' lifestyle which we have today. People give lots of excuses why they could not come to church, be part of the prayer meeting, and other spiritual activities. The lifestyle of Christians in this dispensation has been described by Patrick Morkey as 'the rat race'⁶, which implies, we are always on the run pursuing something or something is pursuing us, thereby causing spiritual decay which has not in any way help the growth the church.

Secondly, we have a Christianity today which is only on the surface and lacks the substance because most Christians no longer in the habit of praying constantly just like John Wesley practiced in his time. The practice of prayer is already a Sunday, Sunday affair for most Christians. Because they leave their houses in hurry and when they return they are tired and just sleep off, until they are able to attend Sunday service again before they can pray. The effect of such lifestyle is the myriad of spiritual decay we find in our society today, coupled with the inability of an average Christian to exercise spiritual authority. This lifestyle of not praying has also affected most ministers of the gospel. Some ministers spend lots of time in front of their television sets and on their mobile phone chatting, rather than praying like John Wesley who increased his prayer time from four to eight hours daily.

Other discipline lifestyle of John Wesley like daily reading of the scriptures and other religious materials, visitation to members, helping the poor and needy, writing and travelling long distance on horseback to preach the gospel, are only being practiced by a minority of Ministers today. There have been reports in recent times of minister who are referred to as 'unproductive'. This is largely owing to the lack of continuous self-development of the ministers. Other ministers have equally been reported to be promiscuous as a result of inability to discipline their body, while some have been seen to be begging for money from members because of lack of discipline of a simple lifestyle.

IV. CONCLUSION

Any Christian or minister that lacks discipline, especially spiritual discipline will hardly impact the lives of others. A survey of men and women whom God used greatly at divers time in history reveals some kind of discipline or the other, which is an indication of the sacrifice they made for God to be so interested in their lives. John Wesley has become a model and pattern for ministers of the gospel in the 21st century to emulate. Some pastors today call this the old time religion, but however we view these practices, they are still very germane for spiritual development and formation of Christ like nature in us. Christians especially ministers are therefore required to spend time daily in reading, praying and meditating on the scriptures. This should be included in our daily routine, first personally, then with our family and during public worship. By this means, we will be able like apostle Paul ready for every good works'

It is important that Christians, especially if one is gifted to write, should form the habit of writing something for the edification of the souls of other believers. If we write and publish on the cyberspace, we will be able to reach lots of people who are in dire need with the gospel of Christ thereby saving their souls. The opportunity to publish our Christian literatures abounds on the cyberspace with little or no cost unlike in the time of John Wesley when technology has not advance to the extent it is today. Methodist ministers are therefore challenged to write on topical, contemporary issues, that will challenge the government and the church to begin to do what is right and needful. We need more of John Wesley in this dispensation, who will take both the church and the government by surprise and cause a revolution in this era.

The aspect of giving to the widows, fatherless, motherless and orphan, indeed the less privileged should be taken into consideration. This can be done individually and corporately. If this is done, we will not only follow the legacy that John Wesley left for us rather, we will be following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who went about doing good, feeding and caring for people indiscriminately.

⁶ Patrick Morkey, 'The Man in the Mirror' <https://www.maninthemirror.org>: (Accessed 10 April 2016)