

A CALL TO THE CONSERVATIVE HOLINESS MOVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Deeply concerned for the future of the Holiness Movement, and especially of the Conservative Holiness Movement of which we are a part, we issue this call for the full and vigorous recovery of our heritage as Christians of Wesleyan conviction. We share the distress of those who warn of "historical drift," spiritual apathy, and surrender to the depraved secular culture that surrounds us. We submit that a renewed commitment to the essential principles of scriptural Christianity which we have received in classical Methodist belief, piety, and mission will prepare and strengthen us for the challenges that confront us. We appeal, therefore, to our entire movement to unite with us joyfully in this commitment, pledging uncompromising faithfulness to God's word and to creative relevance in our ministry. Upon the original foundations of our movement, therefore, we must build determined, effective, and contemporary witness to God's unchanging summons to holy hearts and holy lives.

Implicit in this recovery are the following specific themes:

I. A CALL TO BIBLICAL FIDELITY

As Wesleyans we affirm that the Holy Scriptures, as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, are the basis of authority in the Church, normative for all our faith and practice. We declare with the English Reformers, "Holy Scripture contains everything that is necessary for salvation, so that whatever is not stated in it, or cannot be proved by it, must not be required of any man as an article of belief or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."

Yet we have often focused on issues and made demands which we cannot legitimately establish from the Scriptures. As a result, trivial notions and speculations at times have marred our witness. We call, therefore, for renewed submission to the absolute authority of the Bible, not as a revered icon but as the touchstone for both our personal lives and our public proclamation. For in every age, the Church must submit itself unconditionally to the Word of God, interpreting it in harmony with itself, in keeping with the best insights of historical and literary study, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with respect for the historic understanding of devout Christian scholarship.

II. A CALL TO HISTORIC ROOTS AND CONTINUITY

We gladly affirm our allegiance to the classical Christianity of the centuries, confessing its faith, sharing its historic witness, living out its godly discipline, and claiming all of its treasures as our own. We give God praise for our legacy of evangelical Christianity magnificently set forth in the heroic lives of ancient Christians, the faithful witnesses of the Middle Ages, the stalwart testimony of the Reformers, the Biblical proclamation of the Wesleys, and the earnest piety of the early Holiness Movement. We rejoice

in the lives and ministry of earnest followers of Our Lord from every branch of orthodox Christianity.

But too often we have smugly disconnected ourselves from our Christian past; and in so doing we have become theologically shallow, spiritually weak, and blind to the work of God in the lives of others. We have withdrawn ourselves into protected enclaves, congratulating ourselves on our superiority over other Christians, sometimes refusing fellowship with them because of our disagreement in doctrine or in practice, and ignoring the continuing work of the Holy Spirit throughout all the universal Church. At best this is lamentable ignorance and at worst, sectarian bigotry. We call therefore, with John Wesley, for a “league offensive and defensive with every soldier of Christ,” reclaiming the richness of our Christian heritage and our essential unity with all who truly confess Him as Lord.

III. A CALL TO CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Union with Christ establishes membership in His Church, the community of the faithful in all times and places. It is founded by Our Lord and established upon Himself, and we claim His infallible promise that the gates of hell shall never withstand it. As we live out our faithfulness to Him we must also live in faithfulness to the Church which is His body and bride, living and dying in its communion. We affirm the traditional Protestant insistence that the visible Church is the congregation of the faithful in which the “pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance.”

Too often, however, we have adopted a narrow and individualistic approach to our Christian Faith. Sometimes we have so emphasized personal spiritual relationship that we have forgotten that that relationship must be realized, strengthened and advanced within the company of God’s people. At other times, we have imagined that we were the Church, or at least that the Holiness Movement was its most significant component rather than only a tiny segment of its fellowship. We call, therefore, for renewed understanding of the Biblical doctrine of the Church as “the pillar and ground of the truth,” reverence for its orthodox confessions, submission to its holy discipline, and faithfulness to its common life. As a coalition of holiness believers within its communion, we gladly but humbly offer our gifts to the universal Church—gifts which center in our historic focus on holiness of heart and life.

IV. A CALL TO CHRISTIAN HOLINESS

Holiness of heart and life flowing out of love for God, as we believe, is the “central idea of Christianity,” for this is God’s redemptive purpose for our fallen humanity. Holiness is both His gift and our pursuit, and as the writer to Hebrews reminds us, without it none of us shall ever see the Lord. Negatively holiness is separation from all that is sinful and unlike Christ and positively separation unto godliness, righteousness, and full Christlikeness. It begins in regeneration by the Spirit, flourishes in the work of entire sanctification, and advances throughout our lives. As Wesleyans, we reassert the biblical passion of our forebears “to reform the continent and spread scriptural holiness over these lands.”

We confess, however, that our passion for holiness of heart and life has sometimes been reduced merely to external codes and prohibitions, and “holier-than-thou” attitudes toward those who differ from us. As such we have become shell without substance, and betrayed the Scriptural mandate to be holy, because the Lord our God is holy. We therefore call our movement to a renewed love for God from which will blossom consistent and winsome lives of holiness, first in motivating purpose, and second, in outward conduct. This means that we must continue to accentuate both of the definitive moments we identify as works of divine grace, conversion and entire sanctification, all the while giving proper attention to the progressive growth in grace by the Spirit and the increasing separation from the world which our Methodist forebears so firmly stressed.

V. CALL TO METHODIST PIETY

Our Methodist heritage has underscored the necessity of devout personal piety grounded in sincere love and profound reverence for God. This implies binding and life-long covenant with Him, living faith in Christ our great sin-bearer, allegiance to the inner principle of “jealous godly fear,” commitment to disciplined discipleship, faithful obedience to His holy Law, dynamic growth in grace, and faithful use of the means of grace. All holiness of heart and life must be grounded in sober and steadfast love for God.

Sometimes, however, our emphasis on external regulation and dutiful performance has ignored the principles of authentic piety. Our appeals to holy conduct, which are both legitimate and necessary, have often been based more in the impulse to preserve the taboos of our religious subculture than in allegiance to the Word of God and its demands. The heart of all Christian obligation is loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind and then “to fear Him and keep and His commandments.” Not only are we called to do what is right but also to love what is right, for this reason abstaining from all that He condemns and embracing all that He enjoins. We will never stop the “historical drift” among us merely by enforcing traditional legislation but by vigorous and renewed insistence upon authentic relationship with God and passionate pursuit of Him. Gladly we reaffirm our traditional emphasis upon simplicity, modesty, stewardship, separation from the world, and conscientious lifestyle, but all this must be within this warm and gracious context of loving what God loves and hating what God hates.

As Methodists, therefore, we call our movement to return to our originating commitment to principled covenant with God, which according to the General Rules of 1743, demanded these commitments: (1) the renunciation of all known sin; (2) the embracing of all positive virtue, and (3) the faithful practice of the means of grace, especially “the instituted means of grace,” defined as the Word, prayer, fasting, Christian fellowship, and the Lord’s Supper. This demands disciplined life within the community of the Church, a renewing of our historic pattern of spiritual formation through small accountability groups, such as the class meeting, and faithful submission to healthy and holy discipline, while altogether dependent upon the gracious work of the Spirit who changes us “from glory to glory” into the likeness of Our Lord.

VI. A CALL TO AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

Christ Our Lord has delegated the powers of government to duly-appointed officers in the Church, and we are mandated to obey them faithfully. All Christians are to be in practical submission to one another and to these designated officials in the Church. The edifying and equipping of God's people and the administration of church discipline are committed especially to faithful pastors who are called not as "lords over God's heritage," but as examples and as shepherds of His flock.

We therefore deplore the spirit of autonomy and even anarchy which so often has marked our movement. Too often in our congregations and denominational life we have exhibited rebellion against the authority structures which God Himself has established, boasting our independence of them, and refusing to submit to their godly discipline. This has been evidenced by continuing divisions among us, often over matters unconnected with allegiance to Scriptural truth. As the heirs of classical Christianity, we have not so learned Christ. "Obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable to you" (Heb. 13:17).

We call therefore for renewed exposition of the Scriptural qualifications for leadership within the Church, corporate exhortation to beware the deceitfulness of sin, and biblical obedience and submission to those whom God has made under-shepherds over us. God grants no Christian autonomy from mutual submission and accountability within the Body of Christ. We must therefore repent of our oft refusals to exercise the Scriptural means of restorative discipline within the Church and commit ourselves to loving one another even as our Father loves us in chastening and scourging every son whom He receives.

VII. A CALL TO CORPORATE WORSHIP

Corporate worship is the exalted glory and central pulse of every Christian congregation. At its core, worship is the adoration of God, Holy, Blessed, and Undivided Trinity, and by apostolic mandate, it is to be conducted with decency and order. In the public worship of the Church, as the old Methodist communion service reminds us, we join "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven [to] laud and magnify" the Lord of hosts, joining in their eternal hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts, Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory."

As Wesleyans we have a two-fold heritage in Christian worship. On the one hand is the warmth and earnestness of fervent and joyful devotion. On the other is the sober restraint of form, dignity, and tradition. Both are essential. Too often, however, we have emphasized the first and neglected the second. We need not neglect the subjective emphasis so characteristic of our services, but we must ground our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving in the great objective acts and truths of God Himself.

We call therefore for the renewal of our corporate worship, based in the mandates of Scripture and in the tradition of evangelical orthodoxy, centered in the faithful ministry of Word and Sacrament. Our preaching must be based in conscientious interpretation and earnest proclamation of the Holy Scriptures, and our administration of the sacred ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper must be meaningful and faithful. We lament our neglect of baptism and the Lord's Table, for this is to slight the Saviour who so kindly has established them to fortify our faith, calm our fears, and nourish us with grace.

VIII. A CALL TO CONSISTENT DISCIPLESHIP

Christ commissioned His followers to make disciples through Trinitarian baptism and instruction in all His commands. The early church responded to our Lord's call to aggressive evangelism by taking the gospel to every corner of their world. Yet they realized that the central thrust of the Great Commission was discipleship accomplished through baptism and teaching, so they largely invested their time and energy in systematically teaching new converts the whole counsel of God and equipping them for ministry. This same emphasis elevated Wesleyan Methodism to towering stature in the kingdom of God, while without it Whitefieldian Methodism proved "a rope of sand." We confess that, despite our heritage, evangelism has languished among us. We have largely abandoned our Methodist system of spiritual formation and forgotten how to fulfill our Lord's command to make disciples. We have sought revival without preparing to preserve its fruits. We have emphasized spectacular conversions and neglected the Biblical necessity of disciplined growth in faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. We further acknowledge that where evangelism is taking place among us, a systematic plan for incorporating new converts into the visible Body of Christ through baptism and instruction is largely non-existent.

We call therefore, not merely for a reaffirmation of the importance of evangelism and discipleship, but for a commitment to equip our laity for the work of the ministry, for the establishment of solidly Wesleyan curricula for systematic discipleship, and for the implementation of these training methods in all our churches. This will necessitate a concerted effort on the part of our leaders to reclaim the skills of discipleship, reinstitute regular systems of accountability and affirmation, and to resume obedience to Scripture's mandate to teach faithful men who shall be able to teach others also. We shall begin again to bear much fruit when our disciples themselves become disciple-makers.

IX. A CALL TO RESURGENT HOPE

All Christian life is centered in the resplendent hope that we have through Christ's victory accomplished in His incarnation, atoning death, and resurrection. The sure and certain anchor of the soul, this hope has given gladness and assurance to faithful believers all throughout the centuries of the Church's struggle with the forces of entrenched evil. It assures us of present victory in our personal lives and corporate ministry, but it also points to the final triumph when every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Never have we so needed a renewed sense of the hope that we have in Him. We know the power and devastation of sin, and we acknowledge the increasing degradation of our culture. We are Wesleyans, however; and as our theologians have said, the key note of our theology is not "the pessimism of [fallen] nature" but the "optimism of grace." We therefore call our movement to the joyous expectation of victory which so motivated our spiritual forebears to claim the American frontier for Jesus Christ. We cannot cower before the darkness, paralyzed by "the encircling gloom" which continually we must confront. "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." The same power which brought the Roman Empire to bow before the cross, renewed the Church in the days of the Protestant Reformation, and reshaped the culture in the Wesleyan Revival is also ours as we encounter the moral depravity and sneering secularism of our times. Let us be joyfully faithful, then, creatively relevant, and utterly confident that Jesus' victory

is our own. With gladness we do the work which He has given us, even as we await the consummation when all the earth shall echo with the song of conquest, "Alleluia! The Lord God Omnipotent reigns!"

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