
MISSION HISTORY:
A STUDY IN SUBVERSIVE FIDELITY

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An Induction Address Delivered on August 22, 2000

The Anglican Church, England's national church, was in a sorry state in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Overly entwined with national politics, it had become the original church of the "politically correct." The straight-laced, hot-headed Puritans had been excluded for their anti-royalist positions. The Jacobites had been excluded for their extreme loyalist positions. The Church's legislative body, the Convocation, had been effectively silenced by its own internal quarreling.

The pulpit was used to preach manners, patriotism, and class-duties.¹ Rocking the boat was out-of-fashion. Warm-hearted enthusiasm was frowned on. Moderation was the watchword of the day. Materialism was quietly accepted. Clergy appointments were made largely on the basis of political loyalty rather than Christian piety. Many clergy received livings from several pulpits at the same time and then hired poor curates to do their work for them. New towns grew up that challenged old parish boundaries, and multitudes were left without regular pastoral care. The rich worshiped in locked,

¹J. Wesley Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley. The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 92.

cushioned pews while the poor were relegated to rude benches at the rear of the churches. In Gerald Cragg's words,

The Hanoverian Church of England . . . , stood sorely in need of reform. The age of reason had forgotten certain fundamental human needs; natural religion might satisfy the minds of some, but the hearts of multitudes were hungry. The weaknesses of the established church—its failure to provide adequate care, the inflexibility of its parish system, its neglect of the new towns—left a vast and needy population waiting to be touched by a new word of power.²

Into this church, John Wesley was born. It would have been hard to love the Anglican Church more fervently than John Wesley did. He was the son of an ordained Anglican minister, the brother of Anglican ministers and himself an ordained Anglican minister. Wesley loved and preached the church's doctrines. He faithfully attended the church's sacraments. He required no pulpit or payment from the church, but instead he threw his energies into extending the ministry of the church to its neglected members across and even outside parish boundaries.

When John Wesley began to organize his Methodist societies, it was not to compete with the church, but to support and supplement its ministries. His stated aim for his societies was, "Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."³ Wesley poured his boundless energies into extending the church and bringing revival to it. Though often encouraged to lead his societies out of the Church of

²Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church & the Age of Reason 1648-1789* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1970), 141.

³Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others from the year 1744 , to the year 1789, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, Reprint from 1872), 299.

England, Wesley stubbornly resisted. He loved the church too much to leave it the way it was. So he stayed. Criticized, ridiculed and often abused by the sons of the church, Wesley stayed and labored as a lowly unassigned minister to revive both church and country. The revival spread with force as Wesley preached, and disciplined and organized converts throughout the United Kingdom.

As Wesley's ministry grew and his societies multiplied, something else began to happen in England. English merchant ships were ruling the seas and establishing thriving power bases in North America, the West Indies, India, Africa and in the far South Pacific. Explorers, merchants and merchants' chaplains began to write descriptive accounts of their travels and the places they visited. Revived British Christians read the accounts and in their hearts began to grow a concern to send the life-giving gospel to the peoples of those faraway places. Thomas Coke was one of them.

Few people loved John Wesley and the Methodist movement more than Thomas Coke did. An ordained Anglican minister himself, Coke gave his life's energies to serve the Methodist cause. Coke's heart and his ministry first began to catch fire when he was ministering as a curate in the village of South Petherton. Coke's Methodist sympathies became so irritatingly obvious as he conducted services that he was publicly dismissed in 1777.⁴ Within a year he was serving zealously among Wesley's societies. Forty-five years younger than Wesley, Coke became Wesley's right hand man in Wesley's senior years. Wesley relied on Coke both as his secretary and as his personal representative to the societies. Coke responded with enthusiastic devotion. It was to Thomas Coke (along with Frances Asbury) in 1784 that Wesley entrusted the setting up of a church government for the Methodists in the newly-independent United States of America.

⁴John Vickers, *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1964), 22-30.

Coke made eighteen trans-Atlantic sea voyages in his service to Wesley's Methodism in the USA.

But Thomas Coke had read of lands in Africa and the East where people had no knowledge of the one true God. As much as he loved Wesley and his British mission, Coke was not satisfied. It was not enough for Coke that Methodism work to convert the people of Britain and Ireland. Coke heard God calling the vigorous Methodist societies to send preachers to the ends of the earth. Just as Wesley had devoted his energies to turn English and Anglican hearts to God, Coke devoted his most ardent efforts to turning Methodist hearts toward the world.

Coke had been out of his curacy less than a year when he began campaigning to involve Wesley's Methodists in world missions. Wesley was not impressed with Coke's efforts to recruit Methodist preachers to respond to a call from ex-slaves in West Africa. The Methodist Conference considered the call and decided the time was not yet right for such a mission. Coke accepted the decision and continued serving faithfully in the British Isles, but he did not forget the larger world.

In 1784 Coke released a plan for establishing a missionary society. His particular interest this time was in the East, in India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Again Coke's efforts were rebuffed by Wesley and the Methodist Conference. Coke once again accepted the decision and gave himself wholeheartedly to the new work laid on him, that of establishing the foundations for the Methodist Church in America, but he did not forget the world.

Coke tried again in 1786 to call Wesley and his preachers to embrace a world mission. This time he called their attention to a more familiar world, to the Scottish highlands and outlying British Isles, to Nova Scotia and Newfoundland in North America and to the West Indies. He won some ground this time and secured the appointment of missionaries to several of the places mentioned, including the West Indies where a Methodist shipwright was already evangelizing

slaves. Wesley ordained these missionaries himself, five years before his death.

No missionary society was immediately established to support these Wesleyan missionaries, so Coke took on himself the duty of their support. For 25 years, Coke tramped up and down the streets of England, knocking on doors to raise financial support for the expanding Methodist world missionary enterprise. He poured the best of his physical and financial resources into promoting and supporting Methodism's world mission, repeatedly dipping into his own pocket to make up the missions' deficits.⁵

In the meantime, following Wesley's death, the Methodist societies seceded from the Anglican Church. Finally, in 1813, the Methodist Conference assented to allow Coke to fulfill his life-long dream. They appointed him and several other preachers as missionaries to India and Ceylon. Thomas Coke died on the ship before he ever reached India. The British Methodists responded by establishing the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and choosing, at last, to identify themselves as a church with a world mission. Thomas Coke loved Wesley's Methodism. He loved it too much to leave it as it was. Though often rebuffed and criticized, Coke pressed on, laboring hard for the extension of the Methodist societies throughout the British Isles, the USA and the world.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, both the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion of Britain and the Methodist Episcopal Church of the USA had identified themselves as wholehearted missionary churches. They had sent scores of missionaries to all corners of the

⁵For a full discussion on Coke and Wesley's disagreements regarding world missions see Christi-An C. Bennett, "John Wesley: Founder of a Missionary Church?" *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* (May and Oct, 1996): 159-70, 229-36. See also Bennett, "The Development of the Idea of Mission in British Wesleyan Thought, 1784-1914" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Manchester, 1995), 30-55.

globe, armed with the message of a free and full salvation. In 1836 James Dixon declared to a national gathering of British Wesleyan Methodists, “. . . my greatest delight in my Methodism is that it . . . contemplates the conversion of the whole world.”⁶

The Methodist missions, however, were running into a stumbling block. The mission boards were appointing only male missionaries who were accompanied by their wives to their mission assignments. In Asian countries like India and China, women were so completely segregated from men that they could only be evangelized by other women. Additionally, the missionary wives saw that these Asian women needed education so that they could read the Bible, give Christian leadership to their children and effectively participate in the social transformation of their own countries. The missionaries' wives had hearts for the work and many of them took on evangelistic and educational tasks, but found themselves too tied down in caring for their own families. To these compassionate missionaries' wives, the answer seemed simple: recruit single female missionaries to minister among the women of Asia.

American Methodism owes the founding of its missionary women's work to two missionaries' wives, Mrs. Lois Parker and Mrs. Clementina Butler, both of whom served in India.⁷ Warm-hearted holiness women, these missionaries' wives loved Methodist missions too much to leave them as they were, struggling hopelessly to find the key to the heart of the Indian family. They were not willing to wait for the general mission board to decide to initiate a women's missionary program—generations would pass into eternity before that was likely to happen. Lois Parker and Clementina Butler loved Indian women

⁶Notes and Transcripts, 59, Special Series, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies.

⁷This story is recounted by Dana L. Robert in *Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996), 125-88.

too much to leave them any longer as they were, unevangelized, uneducated, and oppressed. Other women had begun to form female missionary societies to focus on ministry to women— why not the American Methodists, too?

On furlough in 1869, Lois Parker and Clementina Butler went to work to make their dream a reality. The two of them met in Boston with a woman who had been involved in organizing the Congregational women's missionary work. They took her ideas to a group of leading Methodist women in Boston. Those efforts gave birth to the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The officers of the general Methodist missionary board did not like the women organizing independently of their control. Consequently they restricted the women from raising money in church services and public meetings. Control issues surfaced on mission fields, too, where some general board missionaries found that the women's work did not always fit comfortably into their narrower ideas about mission. The male missionaries were not accustomed to working with strong-minded single women, dogged in their determination to better the lot of their sisters. Sometimes conflicts arose, but the Methodist women pressed forward anyway, laboring with all their resources to bring the light of the gospel to women of other lands. Their work produced the largest, most influential woman's missionary organization in the United States, sending out scores of female teachers, doctors and evangelists; and establishing hospitals, schools and colleges that effectively served women for generations.⁸

The history of mission is, in many ways a history of subversive fidelity. Eminent mission historian Andrew Walls speaks of the missionary societies formed in the modern missionary era as “the

⁸Ibid.

fortunate subversion of the Church.”⁹ Those missionary societies were instigated by men like William Carey who deeply loved their churches, but plainly recognized that without a new way of thinking and a new form of organization their churches could not fulfill their worldwide mission. They loved their churches too much to leave them as they were, spinning their wheels while untold millions waited for the gospel that the churches held but had no means to send. In their stubborn loyalty to the church, they organized for change.

Many of these promoters of global missions worked from the bottom up, circumventing the circles of power. They established sending organizations that operated alongside their churches, thus goading them to a deeper commitment to missions. Ordinary laymen and women had grown used to being ignored in the larger affairs of the Church of England. Mission organizers changed all that by forming those ordinary people into the heart and soul of a global mission enterprise. William Carey was a poor bi-vocational pastor, but it didn't take money to instigate the organization of a missionary society. It took heart and hand and voice. Carey gave all three. John Wesley stubbornly clung to the Anglican Church whilst doing what the church was not equipped to do: evangelizing and discipling the ordinary people of the British Isles. He was a lowly priest with no political power in the Church, but political power wasn't saving Britain anyway. Britain needed spiritual power and Wesley's preachers delivered just that—from the bottom up. Thomas Coke was an oddity in the Methodist Connexion and never extremely popular, but getting his movement involved in missions didn't require popularity—just stubborn love and determination and those Coke gave in large measure. A seat on the general mission board of the Methodist Episcopal Church was not required to begin a missionary movement of women's work for women. What were needed were a large

⁹Andrew Walls, “Missionary Societies and the Fortunate Subversion of the Church,” *The Missionary Movement in Christian History. Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 241-54.

helping of compassion and a few concerned friends. Clementina Butler and Lois Parker found both near at hand.

When I was a girl, my parents taught me a little motto, “Leave things better than you found them.” “Leave things better than you found them,” they repeated it often and they modeled it always. I didn’t realize then the subversiveness of their advice. They were counseling me not to accept the status quo, not to be satisfied with things the way I found them. They were encouraging me to believe that, however weak and unempowered I found myself, I could help to improve the world around me, I could work from the bottom up for renewal and change.

When he was still a college student my father began to pastor a small, struggling church. The church had been small and struggling for decades and pastor after pastor had come and gone, staying two or three years, then resigning, leaving the church the way it had always been. But my parents loved that little church too much to leave it the way they found it. Surely God wasn’t satisfied for a holiness church to crawl along lifeless and ineffective. My father walked door to door in the most spiritually neglected corners of the town sharing the gospel of Christ. Hungry souls began to respond. My parents prayed and worked and stayed. For 34 years they stayed, through criticism, a church split, a church merger, economic hardship and even a mafia threat. They stayed—loving that neglected church and that neglected town. The church grew strong and healthy, discipling new converts, and, over time sending more than 20 men and women into ministry.

When my parents finally moved on to a new assignment, they left a church that was transformed. Hardly anything was left of the old church my father had gone to pastor those years before—the location, the building, the denominational ties, the programs, the leadership, the spirit, the worship patterns—all were new and constantly being renewed. In the new building, set on a hill, worshiped a throng of people transformed by the grace of Christ. I can still hear their testimonies ringing; I can still see their faces shining and I can still feel

the power of that congregation's prayers. My parents' motto and their model of subversive fidelity form my life's challenge.

The modern missionary movement has accomplished wonderful things, but our world remains a hurting place. After two hundred years of modern missions, I find myself today in a world where nearly four thousand ethno-linguistic groups still lack an adequate gospel witness, where the Bible is completely unavailable in half the spoken languages, where the most populous nations have very little access to the gospel, where two billion people remain essentially cut-off from the gospel. After two hundred years of modern missions I find myself in a world where women make up one-third of the world's official work force but carry two thirds of the world's work hours.¹⁰ After two hundred years of modern missions, I find myself in a world where over one-third of the women are illiterate, where in some countries female illiteracy exceeds 90 percent. After two hundred years of modern missions, I find myself in a world where famine and war have created 15 million refugees,¹¹ where 750 million people are chronically undernourished; where 34 thousand children die every day of hunger and preventable diseases.¹² After two hundred years of modern missions, I find myself in a world where sixteen thousand people a day contract HIV,¹³ a world where the innocence and health of unknown numbers of children is sacrificed on the altars of adult lust and greed. These are the lost Jesus came to seek and to save. After two hundred

¹⁰Dana Robert, "Revisiting the Women's Missionary Movement," *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 114.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²World Relief Corporation, "State of the World," *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 569-70.

¹³Ibid., 573.

years of modern missions, what will it take to reach these poor and lost ones?

After John Wesley's first experience preaching in an open field, he recorded this in his journal,

At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation . . . to about three thousand people. The scripture on which I spoke was this, (is it possible any one should be ignorant, that it is fulfilled in every true Minister of Christ?) "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind: To set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."¹⁴

When Jesus quoted that passage in Nazareth, his people tried to throw him off the edge of a cliff for his subversive fidelity. After 200 years of the modern missionary movement, millions of people are still waiting to see the fulfillment of that text in the fields where they live. In the words of Gerald Cragg, there is still "a vast and needy population" out there "waiting to be touched by a new word of power." What will it take to reach them? It will take courage. It will take ingenuity. It will take stubbornly persistent love. It will take a subversive fidelity that is willing to challenge the church to new patterns and new passion. It will take dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ who love the church and the world too much to leave them as they are.

David Wells characterizes petitionary prayer as "rebellious against the status quo." In his words, "to come to an acceptance of life 'as it

¹⁴"The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley," *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, reprint of 1872 edition), 185.

is, ' . . . is to surrender a Christian view of God.'¹⁵ Wells suggests that Christians have lost their righteous anger at the evil so prevalent in our world. "Unlike the widow in the parable [of the unjust judge] we find it easy to come to terms with the unjust and fallen world around us—even when it intrudes into Christian institutions. It is not always that we are unaware of what is happening," Wells states, "but simply that we feel completely impotent to change anything."¹⁶ That is the kind of mentality that paralyzed the church in eighteenth century England. But we are no more impotent to change our world today than John Wesley, Thomas Coke and Clementina Butler were to change their world of the past. Christians, in their praying, and in their acting, are called to rebel against the paralyzing status quo wherever it is found. The lost of the world will only be found, the hurting of the world will only be healed, the captives of the world will only be freed when godly rebels steadfastly refuse to accept the status quo.

With all the need in the world today, one might wonder why I give my energies to studying and teaching stories from the moldy past. One might wonder why I don't just pour my energies into acting in the present and planning for the future. Let me be very careful to assert that the model of subversive fidelity I am presenting is not a model of radical discontinuity with the past. It stands in loving, faithful continuity with all the holy labors that have gone before. It does not advocate rubbishing the past. It is subversive, yes, and brimming with newness and life, but it is also faithful, respectful and grateful in respect to the past. Subversiveness that lacks faithfulness tends to destroy rather than to build and it is doomed to failure. David Howard puts it this way:

¹⁵David Wells, "Prayer: Rebellng Against the Status Quo," *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 143.

¹⁶Ibid., 144.

We learn from the past so that we can live effectively in the present and plan wisely for the future. He who will not learn from history is doomed to repeat her mistakes.

We learn about the Lord's work in past times so that we can understand him better and trust him more fully.¹⁷

We study and teach church history not so that we can learn to slavishly replicate the structures and methods of the past. There is no need to rebuild what has already been built. We study church history so that we can faithfully build the upper stories of the church on foundations that have already been laid and on lower stories that have already been built by our spiritual ancestors. As we study the history of the church and its mission, we discover how we can become co-laborers with the workers of the past, advancing the work which they began.

When Jesus read from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . ," he was consciously building his new Kingdom on a foundation already laid by the Old Testament law and prophets. Moses and the prophets of the Old Testament would never have envisioned the path Jesus took to fulfill the truths they proclaimed, but surely they would have rejoiced in the results. When the British and American Methodists transformed their churches into world mission centers they were consciously building on a foundation already laid by the expansively evangelistic spirit and work of John Wesley. Frequently at their missionary rallies and in their missionary publications the Methodists quoted his words, "I look on all the world as my parish. . . ." And yet, when John Wesley spoke those words, he was talking about a British world, not a global world. Wesley never could have imagined the organized world missionary endeavors those words would inspire, and yet I am sure he would have rejoiced in the results, even if he did

¹⁷David M. Howard, "Student Power in World Missions," *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 277.

resist Coke's early efforts.¹⁸ When the men of the Methodist Episcopal Church established their general mission board, they never anticipated the sending of single female teachers, doctors and evangelists to serve as missionaries. Yet, when Lois Parker and Clementina Butler urged the women of Boston to organize the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, they were consciously building on the labors of that board to win the lost of the world, and when the men of the general board began to see the wonderful results of missionary women's labors achieved in spite of male resistance, they soon began to rejoice.

I teach mission history not to preserve the ways of the past but to point the way to the future. Each new generation is challenged to find new, more effective means to deliver the gospel to a lost world. Each new generation is challenged to love the church and the world too much to leave them the way they find them. This is not a rejection of the past, but an honoring of it, a building on it, a fulfilling of its hopes and dreams in ever new and more exciting endeavors. The Apostle Paul told the church at Corinth, "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But one should be careful how he builds. . ." (1 Cor 3:10). We study the past so that as careful builders we can build a work that will survive when tested by fire, as Paul assures us it will be (3:12-15).

From the faithful of the past, we find the road to the future—and it is not the way of passive acceptance. It is not the way of simply taking what is handed to us and handing it on intact—just a foundation with nothing built on top of it. It is a more difficult path than that. The road to the future is the path marked out by John Wesley, Thomas Coke and Clementina Butler. It is the path of subversive fidelity, the path of the loyal, holy rebel, faithful but not slavish, challenging but not arrogant.

¹⁸Bennett, "John Wesley: Founder of a Missionary Church?", 234-236.

I once heard the Nazarene World Mission Director state that he was looking for “loyal rebels” to serve the mission of the Church of the Nazarene.¹⁹ I thank God that I serve a church that has the wisdom to embrace subversive fidelity, a church that still listens to the challenging voice of change as it calls up from the bottom. In listening to that voice, the Church of the Nazarene has established this seminary; it has begun to internationalize church government; it has embraced compassionate ministries in urban centers, formed a partnership with Campus Crusade for Christ in the use of the JESUS film, and approved innovative approaches to church planting. These efforts, as they grow and develop, have the potential to produce revolutionary results in the church, its polity and its leadership.

Today, there are more warm-hearted Christians in Asia than in North America. At the same time the largest populations of unreached people are in Asia. The vital center of the Christian Church has moved from the Western hemisphere to the Southern hemisphere, to Africa, Latin America and the South Pacific. As an American missionary I am a representative of the “western” ways of the past. As a church historian I teach the stories of the past. As a missiologist I have come to APNTS to use the stories of the past to point the way to the future. What that future will look like I do not know, but I do know what it will be built on.

I have come to APNTS to help train careful church builders to build on a firm foundation. I have come to challenge a generation of Asian and Pacific students to love their church enough to leave it better—more passionate, more compassionate, more holy, more missionary—than they find it. I have come to APNTS to train a generation of loyal, church-loving rebels who are willing to work hard enough, stay long enough and speak loudly enough to begin a movement of holy transformation in the world in which they serve. Perhaps one of you will become the John Wesley, Thomas Coke or

¹⁹Louie Bustle, *New Missionary Leadership Training*, February 2000.

Clementina Butler for which your generation is waiting. I love my church and I love this weary old world for which Christ died. I love them too much to leave them the way they are. My prayer is that I will have the grace to embrace the holy transformation that will come as the loyal rebels of Asia and the Pacific begin to challenge the old structures and methods in which I myself have grown too comfortable.