

# The Lost Method of the Methodists

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John Wesley was the founder of a small group at Oxford in England who became known as the Methodists because of their required method of adding fervor and zeal to their discipline of finding perfection. As the Methodists gained national interest, questions must have arisen since Wesley was not known to have described what the method of fervor and zeal actually meant. It is quite possible that he was not able to fully explain what to him must have been a gut reaction. However, many years after his Oxford days he finally gave a very unique and powerful sermon entitled *On Zeal*.<sup>1</sup>

This sermon started with a brief reminder of the ancient Greek origin of the word, which implies that Wesley relied upon his audience's knowledge of the earlier meaning of zeal.<sup>2</sup> With only that brief reminder, he jumped immediately into why it was important to use zeal as a method to find perfection. "Without zeal it is impossible, either to make any considerable progress in religion ourselves, or to do any considerable service to our neighbor, whether in temporal or spiritual things." He then gave a detailed discussion of how zeal was generally used for evil purposes instead of good, such as causing wars and cruelty to others and then asked, "But is it not possible to distinguish right zeal from wrong? Undoubtedly it is possible. But it is difficult; such is the deceitfulness of the human heart; so skillfully do the passions justify themselves."

Wesley then described Christian Love, which can only be understood with the ancient view of Love as consisting both of a direction or goal as well as a power to manifest it. "It is a certain truth, although little understood in the world, that Christian zeal is all love. It is nothing else. The love of God and man fills up its whole nature." To fully grasp Wesley's statement, one must understand that Love is an integral part of zeal. Wesley argued that he learned this meaning from "Primitive Christianity" based upon the Love/zeal of the Greeks that combined an omnipotent zeal and ubiquitous Love. This omnipotent and ubiquitous force of Love was the power which changed individuals and the world. The Greeks indicated the result of this Love with the word *philo-* which was the power that drove a generous person to become a philanthropist or a seeker of knowledge to become a philosopher.

Over time, much of the original meaning of Love and zeal has been lost to the public as the terms became more limited and centered upon malleable human egos and desires. Also, the public has always had a fear of the dark side of the power of Love which Wesley called its evil nature. His warning reflects Plato's warning about Love/zeal or *Eros*: "*Eros* directed to self is the underlying cause of all the offenses done by an individual; for the lover is blinded by the beloved, so that he judges wrongly...and thinks that he always ought to prefer himself to the truth."<sup>3</sup>

The method of John Wesley was not Love, but rather learning to control and direct zeal and then trusting the resulting Divine Love. His method offers an explanation of the statement of Jesus about not controlling the giving of alms,<sup>4</sup> but rather controlling the zeal of giving alms, or perhaps the *Proverbs* statement, of letting the heart choose the path, but letting the Lord direct the steps.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley, J. (1872 Edition) *Sermons of John Wesley*. Wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-92-on-zeal/

<sup>2</sup> Greek: *zēlos* has a myriad of meanings: jealousy, emulation, honor, glory and spirit.

<sup>3</sup> Plato's *Republic*, Book 9, Paragraph 60

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 3:1-4

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 16:9

The ancient concept of the transformational powers of Love and zeal can now be explained by hormones which the ancient Greeks called *haoma* or *ambrosia* or the food for the inner gods. A recent article in *Scientific American*,<sup>6</sup> for example, describes zeal as the power of the adrenal hormones preparing the body for a challenge as, "...epinephrine is the one handing out guns; glucocorticoids<sup>7</sup> are the ones drawing up blueprints for new aircraft carriers..." Wesley would no doubt have understood this phrasing as explaining how zeal could drive individuals to war and cruelty, but would certainly have preferred the models honoring the power of Love in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>8</sup>

But explaining zeal as derived from hormones raises an even larger problem to modern individuals who were trained from childhood to suppress their inner hormones and maintain a constant judgmental tension or stress. At the same time, they were conditioned to fear and stifle any inner fires, deep feelings, or yearnings.

Certainly, John Wesley proved the power of his method as he not only brought forth a new force into the Protestant movement, but he was also a strong contributor of the usage of electro-therapy for thousands of people in his free medical clinics. To further prove his inner control, he also lived a full life of 88 years, long before internal medicine and pharmaceuticals.

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<sup>6</sup> Sapolsky, Robert, "Taming stress," *Scientific American* 288 (September 2003)

<sup>7</sup> A group of corticosteroids from the adrenals

<sup>8</sup> Plato *Symposium*. B. Jowett (Trans.)