



MAKING HOLINESS ATTRACTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

It was an honour to be asked to give the Headway (Ireland) lecture at the Irish Methodist Conference in June 2015. I have been a member of this movement since Rev Dr Donald English began it as Conservative Evangelicals in Methodism (CEIM) many years ago. In Ireland the movement is called “Headway” while in England it is “Methodist Evangelicals Together” (MET.)

Headway exists to:

- Uphold the authority of Scripture
- Seek Spiritual Renewal
- Pray for Revival
- Spread Scriptural holiness
- Emphasise the centrality of the Cross

As Christians in the Methodist Church we believe that our calling is to live holy lives and offer Christ to others. It is our calling to “Spread Scriptural Holiness.” An unbelieving public needs to see that the message of Jesus has transformed our lives, before they will accept our message. Indeed, the Methodist Church could be described as a “Holiness Movement.” And, as one of the leaders of the 18th Century Evangelical Revival, John Wesley’s vision was not just to lead vast numbers to accept Christ as their personal Saviour. He saw that, however important it was, there was so much more to following Jesus than just that first step of conversion. That first step must lead to many other steps if we are to make progress along the Christian pathway.

Rev John Wesley had re-discovered a key element of New Testament teaching that holiness is a living, dynamic relationship with God. Wesley’s was not the static view that some seemed to hold. There are always more discoveries to be made as we pursue our journey.

John Wesley used word pictures to teach this message and famously wrote:

“Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third is religion itself.”

(The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained; Works 9:227)

You could say that holiness infused the spirit of the Methodists and as a result, their early discipline was like a practical pathway to holiness. Wesley's great ability lay in the very practical "stepping-stones" he outlined for those who had been "born again" during the Revival, and who wanted to know God better.

As this talk for the Headway meeting was being prepared for publication I was asked to attach some further teaching on this subject. So, while the first part of the booklet is the Headway lecture, the second part is based on a sermon about some aspects of holiness which I have used from time to time. Wesley made use of pictures and metaphors to illustrate his messages, and in both talks I have tried to do the same. I am grateful to Ray Elwood for his drawings.

You will read of some of the familiar New Testament pictures: the corn of wheat falling into the ground; the athlete throwing aside anything that hinders; and St Paul's haunting picture of being crucified with Christ. My hope is that the second part will help to spell out, in more practical ways, some of the helpful steps we can all take along the path of holiness.

Yes, it's a glorious life and an attractive life. But it is also a disciplined life, of daily responding to the call of our Master to "come and die."

Ken Wilson

CHAPTER I

MAKING HOLINESS ATTRACTIVE: SOMETHING WORTH SEARCHING FOR!

What a wonderful topic! What a challenge! “Making holiness attractive” not only to weary Christians who have often been hurt and let down by the church, but also to a sceptical world, which has often been put off by the behaviour of those of us within the church. Yes, that’s the challenge. It’s a wonderful topic.

It is also a scary topic! For, who in their right mind would even dare to claim to be an expert on holiness? We can all speak with much more confidence on topics like burst pipes in church halls, evangelism, youth work, and so on – but holiness seems to be on a much more personal level.

It’s like giving a man a special badge for years of humble service to the church, and then watch him go and spoil it all – by proudly wearing the badge! There are no experts here – only apprentices. So, I’ll go for the same “cop out” as Wesley used:

“I tell you flat, I have not attained the character I draw”!

(Letter dated March 5, 1767.)

Like everyone else, I’m a pilgrim on the road. And at times, like you, I get frustrated by the fact that I haven’t moved very far along the path. I confess there are situations in which I feel far from being holy! However, holiness is one of the foundation blocks of our church. One day, Rev John Wesley was looking back over the amazing 18th Century revival, wondering why on earth God had raised up the Methodists. Surprisingly, he didn’t say it was to save thousands of souls! Rather, he pointed to his teaching on “Scriptural Holiness” as the main reason for our existence. When at the Methodist Conference it was asked, *“What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up the Preachers called Methodist,”* the answer was:

“To reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land.”

(Works of John Wesley [vol. 8; ed. T. Jackson; Baker, 1978] 299).

He was saying: “We are a holiness movement that is rooted in Scripture!” It is the balance between truth and grace; scripture and holiness. Holiness is part of our DNA.

John Wesley defines the Methodists as people on the stretch after holiness:

- “a people who profess to pursue ... holiness of heart and life,
- (Both) inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God ...
- (It is) a steady imitation of Him they worship ...
- (It is seen) in universal love filling the heart and governing the life.”

(Advice to the people called Methodists)

For Mr Wesley, words like “holiness,” “perfect love,” and “sanctification” all seem to flow into each other.

In the New Testament, holiness is often used in contrast to what is seen as unholy.

- 1 Thessalonians 4v 3 – 7 it is seen in contrast to a life of immorality & impurity.
- 1 Peter 1v 14 – 16 it is seen in contrast to living according to the evil desires we used to have.
- And in Ephesians 4v 22, 24 it is used of new clothes in contrast to the old clothes we once wore.

So, if holiness is Scriptural and is part of our DNA, how do we make it attractive in today’s world? We are pushing against a strong current here. Often holiness gets a bad press. It is seen as a list of all the things we must not do! People make jokes about ladies with old-fashioned hairstyles, and men with long faces. Few things are as repugnant as a “Holier than thou” attitude. We are not being complementary when we refer to someone as a “holy Joe!”

In this paper we will try to avoid the dry, negative stuff that is often associated with holiness and attempt to find ways of seeing it as something to be desired:

- something beautiful and attractive;
- something that takes our breath away;

- something worth searching for;
- and like a thing of beauty, it will create a home-sickness of the soul that will haunt us and inspire us.

This is what attracted all sorts of people to Jesus. They enjoyed his company! For he inspired a thirst within the very people frowned upon by most religious types. These renegades clearly liked being with Jesus:

- The prostitute who crashed a dinner party and anointed him with expensive perfume.
- Zacchaeus, a tax collector scorned by his neighbours as a Roman collaborator.

Jesus loved and honoured them, and in the process revealed a deep thirst that only he could satisfy. He had an ability to make holiness attractive.

But where to begin? What are the main points a paper like this ought to cover? The more time I spent on preparing this talk, the longer and longer it grew! Holiness is as vast as the entire Christian Faith. And so, in the interests of brevity, we'll have to narrow down the field and leave out a lot of good stuff. Your special insight on holiness may not even get a mention!

Before we look at four pictures of holiness I want to make two preliminary points.

(A) The first point has to do with our general attitude.

Philip Yancey, in his recent book, "Vanishing Grace", says this: *"In the doctrinal and ethical issues of our time the real issue is not whether I agree with someone, but rather, how I treat someone with whom I profoundly disagree!"* We need both truth and grace.

We need to major on a grace-filled attitude, as well as on our desire to speak out fearlessly about the truth of God's Word.

You see:

- Holiness has to influence not only the doctrines we hold – but the manner in which we hold them;
- it is not only about the moral and ethical issues we stand for – but the manner of our standing;

- it is a certain style of living which touches every part of life; truth AND grace must go hand-in-hand.

As I see it, the main reasons why Headway still exists, are:

- to draw attention to the clear teachings of God's Word;
- to call people to adhere to Biblical standards and principles. Especially when society is calling us to go in a different direction.

It is from the Bible that we get our authority. We hold to this with great tenacity, as we seek to live in obedience to God's Word. Yes, there are parts of scripture that we find difficult and awkward. But, as I heard someone say recently, "I would much rather stumble, and limp, and walk under the authority of God's Word, than march with confidence under any other authority." However, that being said, the pastoral reality we face is that many of us fall short, and we reach out to one another seeking love and compassion. We are hungry for grace and we stand in need of both truth and grace. These are the very words John uses in his Gospel to describe our Lord Jesus Christ (John 1v 14) – *"full of grace and truth."* So whatever wing of the church we may feel most comfortable in, the challenge of holiness is that, the way we hold to our beliefs, may turn out to be as important as the truths themselves. It is salutary to remember that holiness can be found in all theological camps – and may be absent from all camps. That is, I suspect, a difficult pill for evangelicals to swallow. But I feel we must, for the sceptical, outside world is watching. I'm convinced that it is not only what we hold dear that will influence them, but the spirit in which we hold them. I, for one, need to confess that this has not always been as important for me as it should have been.

That's the first point: it has to do with a certain attitude.

(B) The second point is that this topic comes with an unexpected "health warning": beware – holiness can become toxic!

Remember, the ISIS leaders are fighting a "holy war". They see themselves as the purest of the pure! And in the name of that purity they justify terrible things. We need to ensure that there is none of the ISIS spirit in us, forcing our "gospel" on others by the fist and the sword!

Henry Nouwen writes about a dark side that can exist alongside all the Christian virtues. He calls this the "under-belly of sin" that can cling to the

good within us. And holiness is not exempt from this under-belly, for it often seems to be accompanied with a rather dark side: a proud, sour, judgmental spirit. We remember that it was the Pharisees who gave Jesus such trouble, and he condemned them roundly. Yet, as they saw it, they were simply trying to be holy. Holiness was their life-long passion! They were a "holiness movement!"

Recently I was talking with a gracious warm-hearted Methodist from Texas who was visiting Ireland. We were discussing this very issue, and he openly confessed: "I see myself as a recovering Pharisee!" He had found that in his pursuit of holiness he had become proud and judgemental! I hadn't heard this statement before. It dawned on me in a moment of truth that I too must apologise, and hold up my hand, for I also am a recovering Pharisee! To cope with this on-going weakness, I desperately need not only the fullness of the Holy Spirit, but I also need the help of my Christian friends, just as much as a recovering alcoholic needs his friends in Alcoholics Anonymous. We all need friends who will speak truth into our lives on a regular basis, for we all tend to have deceitful hearts, which can justify pointing out the speck in the other's eye while failing to notice the massive plank in our own!

Rev John Wesley must have been aware that none of us can escape the danger of the under-belly of holiness. Accountability was placed top of the agenda in the early Methodist Band Meetings where they challenged each other to keep themselves accountable on the subject of holiness of heart and life. Sometimes their questions seemed quite brutal:

- Do you desire to be told of your faults?
- Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatever is in his heart concerning you?
- Do you desire that in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?

I suspect that we would find such intrusive questions to be repugnant today. The Bands have been described as "Little Schools of Holiness" set up by Rev John Wesley to nurture the fruit of the Revival.

Now, the good news is that, by the grace of God, we can overcome the dark side of holiness. All can be saved to the uttermost. There are no limits, and holiness can become an attractive thing.



The Dancer

CHAPTER 2

In this second part of this talk, we'll think of four pictures which, I hope, can speak to us of the attractiveness of holiness. Ask God to speak into your life again through one or more of these pictures. My hope is that these pictures will live with us for the next few months wherever you go.

The first picture is of a Dancer. This suggests joy and laughter. Rev Charles Wesley reflected the joy of the 18th century Revival when he penned the words: "My heart it doth dance at the sound of his name." Graham Kendrick sings:

*Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart
Teach me to move in the power of your Spirit
Teach me to walk in the light of your presence
Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.*

Imagine you are standing at a bus stop on a cold morning. Everyone is looking glum and miserable. Then along comes this guy, doing a crazy dance to the music he hears on his headphones. He's the only one who can hear the music. He has a broad smile on his face.

- He is lost in a world of his own.
- He is immune to the cold and the wet.
- Now, some people scoff at his antics: "he's probably drunk!"
- But, his joy is infectious.
- Others wish they too could hear the music that could transport them beyond the present reality, and open up a whole new world.

Now, if this were a picture of holiness, what might it evoke within us? We might begin to ask:

- "Where has all the joy and laughter gone?"
- "Lord, have I become deaf to your music?"
- "How can I get to hear your music?"
- "Please take away the things that make me deaf – however precious they are to me."

- “Lord, am I too earth-bound?”
- “Are my standards and values, my dreams and longings tainted and tarnished by a fallen world?”

The early Franciscans were reprimanded for laughing too much in church. “Lord, can I ever be accused of such an overflow of joy?” Perhaps I have become too fearful of what others might say? On the Day of Pentecost people said the followers of Jesus were drunk. They didn’t seem to care anymore.

- “Lord, I long to dance again to your music. Forgive me for my cold heart!”
- “And, when I see other brothers and sisters in Christ behaving in strange ways, forgive me for sitting in judgment on that which I do not understand. Perhaps I can’t hear the wonderful music that they hear?”
- “Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart!”

So, whatever else holiness is, it is at least a willingness to listen to the new music and join the dance. Holiness is happy fun; freedom; overflowing joy; inspirational. It must be attractive! Yet, Evangelicals are not always seen in this light. People have seen us contending for the truths of Scripture, but perhaps not always in a gracious manner. I fear we are often seen as dour “hard-liners” and as a result, few of our churches seem to be filled with joyful witnesses. Long before the Wesley brothers lived, the Puritans spoke a lot about holiness. But as someone has said: “they met with a terrible cloud hanging over them because they had a sneaking suspicion that someone, somewhere was having a good time!” I heard about one person who had suffered from a very negative form of holiness teaching. She was left with a rather distorted view of the church. She says that as a child all she knew was that the church was against a whole list of things. “As a child, I remember thinking that they were against adultery in case it led to dancing!”

The picture of the dancer calls us to listen again to the music of heaven. Later on we will mention ways in which we can tune in to this music. This picture speaks to us of a holiness that urges us to hear the music, throw our heads back, and dance like crazy!

The second picture is of an Athlete. This speaks of discipline. No one could



The Athlete

accuse St Paul of becoming soft in his old age.

- He tells us that he buffets his body and brings it into subjection (1 Corinthians 9v 27.).
- He reminds young Timothy of the need to train himself to be godly. (1 Timothy 4v 7; also 1 Corinthians 9v 25.)

We can picture the tennis player Andy Murray taking all the God-given talent he was blessed with, and then honing it day after day in the gym and on the practice court. Or the golfer Rory McIlroy, who hits thousands of practice balls, away from the attention of the crowd. I once turned off the television because Rory was losing his match, but in the end he did not get beaten and won unexpectedly. Where does mental strength like that come from? His coach would point to the hours of practice when no one is looking.

Some fortunate people are born with amazing gifts, but I don't think anyone is born with excellence. Excellence is a choice they make. And holiness involves making some hard choices that demand personal discipline and sacrifice.

The Bible uses strong pictures of the athlete, the farmer and the soldier (2 Timothy 2v 3-7.) These highlight the challenges we take on board when we hear the call to the path of Christian service. And there is something noble within us that responds to these high claims. It is as if, the more demanding the call, the greater will be the response.

Although Rev John Wesley was tough on himself, and although he set the standard very high for others, in so doing he lit a touch-paper that fired up thousands of very ordinary men and women on a desperate search for holiness. They served a Holy God, therefore they too must be holy! They were athletes for God, hungry for more of God. Day by day they were on the stretch, straining every muscle and ligament for the finishing tape. And in the rich fellowship of the Classes and the Bands, they dared to believe that there were no limits to what God can do in and through the human heart.

*Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,
And looks to God alone;*

*Laughs at impossibilities,
And cries, "It shall be done."*

(C. Wesley)

Now, if we think of the Athlete as depicting the attractiveness of holiness, what might we see and hear?

- We may see the need to look again at our own self-discipline.
- We may feel the need to confess that we have listened to the siren voices telling us to go easy on ourselves: "pamper yourself, you are worth it!" "Give yourself more me-time!"
- We may hear again the call to detest sin in all its forms: to set aside every weight and the sin that so easily entangles us ... and run with patience the race before us. (Hebrews 12v 1.)
- For the only safe attitude to sin is to hate sin. And we do this because God hates sin. (Psalm 119v 104.) John Wesley said: *"Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on Earth."*
- Or it may be a wake-up call to take greater care of our physical bodies. As temples of the Holy Spirit we need to be fit for purpose.

So, as we look at the athlete as a metaphor for holiness we ask:

- "Lord, am I becoming soft? Do I give in too easily to lazy habits?"
- You see, if the athlete will beat his body and bring it into subjection in order to win a crown that fades so quickly, are we not willing to submit to greater discipline to gain an eternal crown?
- "Lord, even into old age I want to be an athlete for God."

This picture of the athlete is a call to some hard, disciplined work. The Epistle of James tells us that "faith without works is dead (James 2v 17.)" Now, there is a delicate balance between the two: faith and works. And at times Christians have tipped the balance one way and then the other, as if we are saved and sanctified by our faith OR by our works? There are those within

the Protestant family who are frightened of all this talk of “good works” lest we be seen as trying to earn our way to heaven. And at times this has led to the heresy of “quietism”. An extreme form of this says: “don’t read your Bible; don’t go to church – be quiet, and the grace of God will save you!” I remember we used to sing:

“Holiness by faith in Jesus, not by effort of our own.

Sin’s dominion crushed and broken by the power of grace alone.”

(F R Havergal)

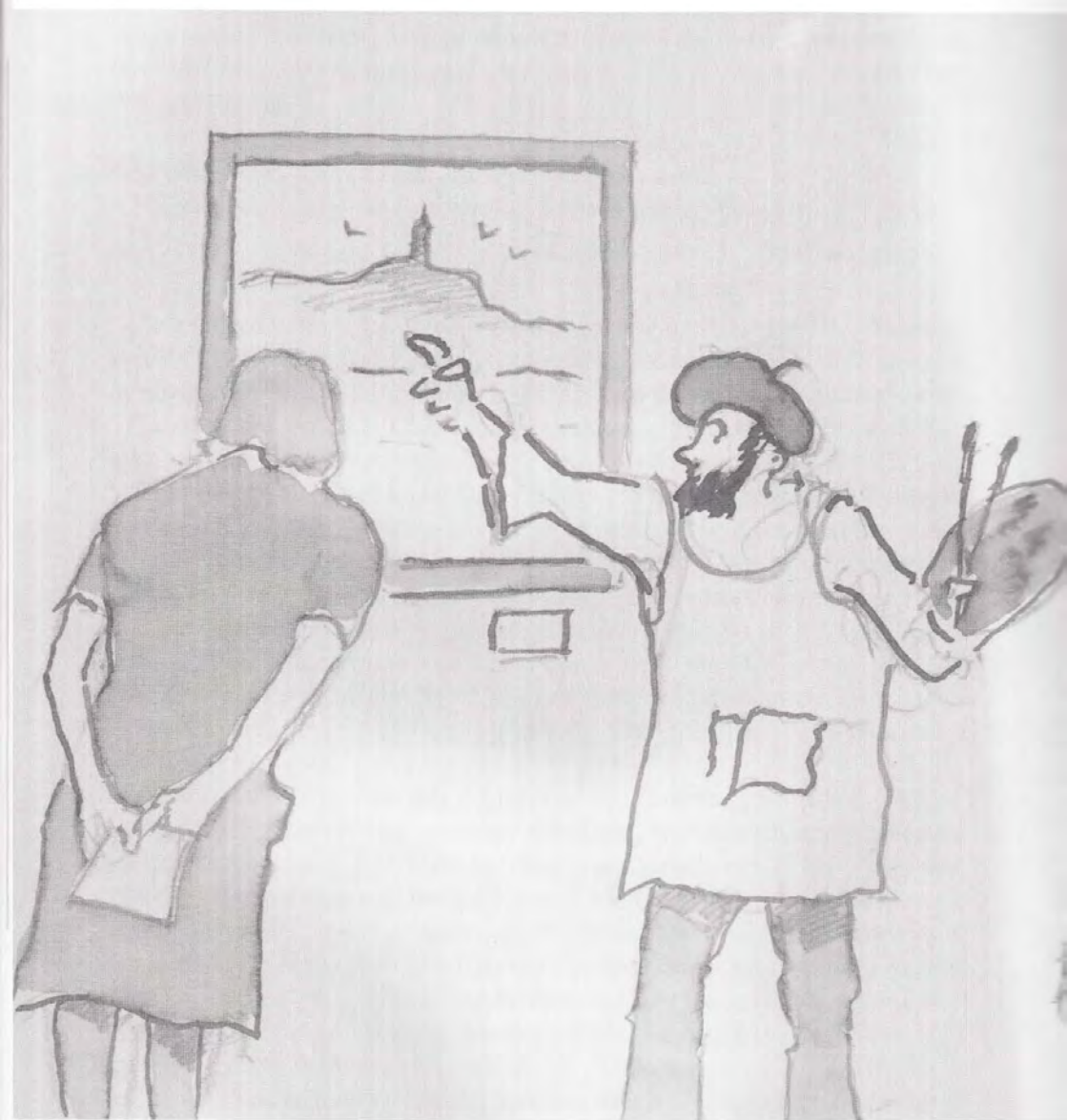
I no longer believe that to be true. For we dare not treat the Holy Spirit as some sort of labour-saving device! Indeed, the Bible teaches us to work hard at our salvation. In Philippians 2v 12, 13 there is a challenge to believers: “Therefore, my dear friends... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” So we must work at it! And how do we do that? “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” We must work out what God works in. We can work, because God is already at work.

I am convinced that at times we need a form of “holy violence” towards all that would drag us back into the old ways. We dare not risk becoming soft and lazy in our service of the Master. The sin of laziness used to rank high with the heroes of the past and it was one of the seven deadly sins! No one could accuse Rev John Wesley of being lazy. He is said to have believed that he was saved by grace – and also by rising at four o’clock every morning and fasting twice a week.

As a youngster in Armagh, I found in the **Covenant Service** a form of muscular Christianity that was very appealing. No other church seemed to demand so much of its members. Here was Christianity at 100 miles per hour! Here was a deep well to drink from. I found the picture of the athlete to be very attractive. It was a challenge to die to self. I wonder at times today are we at risk of making the Christian life too easy? Some have referred to this as “cheap grace” or a “come-easy-believeism” Are we at risk of setting the standard too low? If it is true, that the greater the demand, the greater will be the response, then let us go out and call people to lives of “full surrender”!

I am convinced that a muscular holiness which is seen to be transforming us, will always be attractive to outsiders. When they see holiness changing

sinner like us into people full of the love of Jesus, they will take notice. And it is the same for those of us within the church, when we encounter the “real deal” we too want a drink of the living water that satisfies.



The Artist

CHAPTER 3

The third picture is of an artist. This will help us address all that is hidden within us, our motives and our dreams. Imagine the artist who takes us by the hand and guides us around the art gallery where the pictures are on display. Our mind is the art gallery having beautiful pictures hanging there. Holiness is about having a “beautiful mind”!

There is a gifted artist in the Life Group I meet with each week in Newtownards. He brings wonderfully fresh insights into all our discussions. We have sat enthralled as he has spoken about what some famous artist from the past was trying to say in one of the great masterpieces. And as it happens, he is also deeply troubled at the corroding effect on our minds – caused by the internet and much of what appears on the TV. You see, holiness has to do with what is on the inside. Our outer life and our inner life must be in harmony.

Now, here is the thing: if the Artist and the Art Gallery are illustrations of holiness, what might we learn about glorifying God in our minds and thoughts?

We might begin to ask:

- Do I feel comfortable with the thought that Jesus comes and walks around the art gallery that is my mind?
- What pictures might he see hanging there?
- What are the ones I dwell on the most?
- Have some of the pictures hanging there to do with things like unforgiveness and bitterness?
- We remember that Jesus said that our inner life has a huge impact on how we live: He said that out of the heart that is impure will flow all manner of evil deeds (Matthew 15v 19.). Good deeds flow from a heart that is full of goodness!
- You see, the trouble with things like internet pornography is that it clings to the walls of our minds. It taints all that is beautiful in life.
- Perhaps as we meditate on the idea of the artist and the art gallery, we will want to become transparent people with nothing to hide.

- Holiness has to do with our motives and dreams.
- “Lord, give me a beautiful mind.”

As I see it, one of the most attractive things about holiness is that it offers us an alternative to what is dark within us. It offers us a different lifestyle whereby our minds are so full of the good stuff, that the bad stuff has no room. Paul spells this out in his letter to the church in Philippi and mentions some pictures to hang on the walls:

*“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble,
whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,
whatever is admirable -if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think
about such things.”*

(Philippians 4v 8.)

You see, these are the old masterpieces. It is as if he is saying: “Forget about the old rotten pictures, and instead hang these beautiful pictures on the walls of your mind!” The Scottish preacher Rev Dr Thomas Chalmers spoke helpfully of the “expulsive power of a new affection.”

Holiness then must surely point the way to good mental health. Keeping our minds, by the grace of God, full of peace and joy and love. Rev John Wesley spoke of having our hearts on fire with the love of God:

*“This it is to be a perfect man, to be ‘sanctified throughout’;
even to have a heart so all-flaming with the love of God...
as continually to offer every thought, word, and work,
as a special sacrifice, acceptable to God, through Christ.”*

(Works. XI. p.384.)

Holiness is attractive because it fills our minds with many beautiful things. We can even imagine Jesus walking around the gallery of our mind, with a smile on his face.

The fourth picture is of a pilgrim on a long journey. I think I like this one the best, for it speaks of stepping out and gaining new ground.



The Pilgrim

I suspect that many of us have “bucket-lists” – things we would love to do before we “kick the bucket!” On my list is a desire to walk along the Camino de Santiago. The thought of hiking through the Pyrenees into Spain with the hot sun on my back and chatting with fellow pilgrims – is my idea of heaven on earth. I imagine that there is joy and laughter at the end of the day as the pilgrims share their experiences and celebrate the completion of another section of the walk. For centuries pilgrims have travelled that road. Did you know that St James’ Gate in Dublin used to be the starting place for the Irish pilgrims? So, the idea of holiness linked to pilgrimage seems a perfect fit. The Bible speaks of the “highway of holiness” (Isaiah 35v 8.) Early Christians were known as “people of the way” (Acts 22v 4.) John Bunyan made use of this idea in his “Pilgrim’s Progress.” Christian tourists today can follow in the footsteps of St Paul.

Well, you and I are pilgrims on the road.

If the pilgrim is a picture of holiness, what might it say to us?

- Am I moving on, or am I too content with what I already know of God?
- Can I see that every day is an opportunity for exploring new ground?
- For we don’t intend to get stuck in one place. We want to keep moving.
- We remain open to new things, new aspects of truth and grace.
- We learn from other pilgrims on the road, as well as from the road map that is in the Bible.
- And always we walk in humility, for Pilgrims can lose their way and get bogged down at times.
- When that happens we can wither and die.
- We reach out to others with love in our hearts, to help and to be helped.
- “Lord, am I still progressing? Have I gained any new ground since this time last year?”

One of the things I like about this picture is that it does make a huge difference when people outside the church see us as fellow pilgrims on the road of life. The world is watching us, and I am convinced they will listen better to us as we present ourselves as fellow pilgrims on the way, rather than as members of some superior class who have already arrived. This side of

heaven, we will never be anything other than pilgrims on a journey. We are always hungry for knowledge, hungry for God.

Albert Outler, one of the leading Wesleyan scholars of the last century, believed that Rev John Wesley's view of holiness as a process, rather than a fixed state, gave him a spiritual vision that was unique. John Wesley wrote:

"From the time of our being born again, the gradual work of sanctification takes place," and as we yield to the life of the Spirit within us, "we wait for entire sanctification; for a full salvation from all our sins."

(Sermons of John Wesley 43.)

It was because of his belief that the blessing of full salvation is based primarily on faith and not on works, that he can urge his people to look for this at any time:

"Expect it by faith; expect it as you are; and expect it now."

(Works, VI. p.53.)⁴

This living, growing, dynamic view of a holiness that is ever on the move, has been referred to as:

- The doctrine of "the more."
- The belief that everyone can be saved to the uttermost.
- The Christian pilgrim can live a life without limits.
- Wherever we are on this pathway, we live as people who are not yet home. We remain as pilgrims on a journey.
- There is always more! Yes there is a 2nd blessing! And a 32nd blessing!

To enable us to experience this, along this pathway, Pilgrims **need to find "Watering places" or "Deep Wells" to drink from.** These are often called "the means of grace" or "holy habits" or the "spiritual disciplines". You may know that Rev John Wesley stressed this so much that he was accused of preaching a salvation by works! However, he continued to warn against expecting the end without the means. We cannot expect to make progress along the

highway of holiness, without things like: constant prayer; watchfulness; self-examination; and the hearing of God's word at every opportunity. The Bible is always central for it is a scriptural holiness. These were the wells that sustained them as pilgrims on the highway of holiness. To mix the metaphors, here is where we tune into the music of heaven. As we drink we are refreshed, and we join the dance.

I find it interesting that Mr Wesley admits that he may be wrong about some aspects of his teaching on holiness.

*"For suppose we were mistaken, suppose no such blessing
ever were or can be attained, yet we lose nothing: Nay,
that very expectation quickens us in using all the talents
which God has given us; yea, in improving them all; so that
when our Lord cometh, he will receive his own with increase."*

(Works VI. p.51)

Yes, pilgrims may become weary at times, for the going can be extremely demanding. But with the Holy Spirit working within us, we are determined never to give up or ever cease longing to know more of God and his ways.

CHAPTER 4

We have looked at four pictures / metaphors in an attempt to make holiness attractive. You will think of others. Whatever the picture, let's make it attractive!

I suggest 4 practical decisions we all can take.

1. **Like dancers**, we pray that we will catch again the joy and laughter in following Jesus. And from now on, when we use the Means of Grace, we'll begin again to listen with greater attention for the music of heaven and join the dance – no longer worrying about what others may say. “Lord, I long to join the dance and moving to the rhythm of your music.”
2. **Like athletes**, we will keep our bodies and minds in training for greater service. We will strive for excellence: “Lord, do I need greater self-discipline? Have I become soft and lazy? Lord, today I hear again the call to work out my salvation with fear and trembling for you are at work in me! You are at work in me!”
3. **Like Artists**, we will daily invite the Lord to enjoy the pictures that hang in our minds. The fire of God's love will light up all that is hung on the walls of the gallery, and expel things like fear and hatred. “Lord, I long for a beautiful mind.”
4. **Like Pilgrims**, we will dare to believe that there are no limits to what can happen on this journey as we are led by the Holy Spirit and as we encounter others who travel. “Lord, I want to want this! Help me to keep moving and always gaining fresh ground. And like your children who have gone before me, I will drink deep from the wells along the road.”



Plea for forgiveness

*Forgive them all, O Lord:
our sins of omission and our sins of commission;
the sins of our youth and the sins of our riper years;
the sins of our souls and the sins of our bodies;
our secret and our more open sins;
our sins of ignorance and surprise,
.....and our more deliberate and presumptuous sins;
the sins we have done to please others;
the sins we know and remember,
.....and the sins we have forgotten;
the sins we have striven to hide from others
.....and the sins by which we have made others offend;
forgive them, O Lord,
forgive them all for his sake,
.....who died for our sins and rose for our justification,
.....and now stands at thy right hand to make intercession for us,
Jesus Christ our Lord.*

John Wesley

CHAPTER 5

WHAT IS HOLDING US BACK?

We all need a captivating vision or a picture of what our lives can look like. For John Wesley the vision was holiness. During his long life he gave all his energy and efforts to realise this vision. It burnt in him at all times like a fire. You and I need to catch some of that fire.

Today in most parts of the world, Christian churches are concerned that so few followers of Jesus develop Christ-like attitudes, and few continue to grow in grace throughout their lives. We can run all sorts of excellent Alpha Courses, special Missions, and so on. We are excited when people respond to the gospel, but sadly so many fall away. It is my strong belief that Wesley's dynamic vision of a life of holiness, and how that may be achieved, has much to say to us today.

I remember that as children we used to take part in "sack races." We would line up at the start line with our feet and legs inside an old potato sack. And off we would go up the track, laughing, tripping and falling. No one could run very fast because the restrictions of the sack prevented us. Often Christians feel as if they have entered a type of "sack race": they want to run much faster in the Christian race, but they are held back by many things that keep tripping them up. We become frustrated,

- "Why can't we love people better than we do?"
- Why can't we be more Christ-like?
- Why is progress in my prayer life so slow?
- Why does my heart become cold so easily?"

Well, contrary to what the modern world says about pampering ourselves, and having self-fulfilment as our number one priority, **God's Word tells us that we need to die to certain things if we are to run well.** There is a cross at the centre of Christian discipleship. We are urged to die to self, to "throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." (Hebrews 12v 1.) This

“throwing off”, is at the heart of our discipleship. Indeed, it is like a daily death. The heroes of the faith who have gone before us have found that this is the only way to fruitful Christian service. Jesus calls us to “come and die!”

- Jesus said, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?”* (Luke 9v 23 – 25.)
- John chapter 12 speaks about Christ’s glory being seen only through the cross. Like a seed being planted, he has to die and be put in the ground before his work on earth is finished. *“I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”* (John 12v 24.)
- He then challenges us to do the same: *“The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.”* (John 12v 25, 26.)

Yes, there is a cross at the heart of Christian living. It’s as if, like wild ponies,



we need to be broken before we are of use to the Master. St Paul, speaking of the old things that had to be set aside, says *"I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."* (Galatians 2v 20.)

There is a remarkable story about some archaeologists who dug up one of the Pharaohs' tombs in Egypt. They found things like gold and silver, and weapons of war. They also found grains of corn. The corn had been put there to feed the king as he journeyed into a new land. Now, the grains had lain there in that dry atmosphere for over 3,000 years, serving no useful purpose. You could say that they were useless and wasted. They were still as hard as the day they were put there. However, what is amazing is that beneath the protective husks were living kernels of corn. And when they were put into warm damp soil, the outer crust was broken and the corn began to grow – after 3,000 years! Once the conditions were right, once the husks were broken, they burst into life and produced a harvest.

I think that this is what happens to us. Enormous potential, fantastic potential, can be locked away, and we can remain rather useless for years, until the Lord breaks us. We take up our cross, we are filled with the Holy Spirit, and as a result the rivers of living water flow out to those around us.

Yes, each of us can do wonders for God. We can run the race set before us. We can live a Christ-centred life. But here is the question: what is holding us back? What is the "sack" that keeps tripping us up? This may be illustrated by what happened to a man called Frank. He worked as a missionary educator in the Philippines. Unfortunately he became bitter and resentful when he was not given the promotion he felt he deserved. He had set his heart on becoming the next President of the university, but someone else got the job. He felt that his educational career was at an end, so he reluctantly accepted a job as an evangelist. Sadly, he didn't make much headway as an evangelist, and felt more of a failure than ever. He describes how God met with him and broke him one night as he prayed on a hillside. God convicted him of the lack of love in his heart, and about feeling superior because of his colour and his impressive educational background. Frank was appalled by what he saw. It broke him. In an agony of soul he cried out to God: "Lord, drive the 'me' out of myself, and come and take possession of me. Think your thoughts in my mind!" In other words, "Break me, melt me, mould me, use me." That night God broke him and transformed him. This watershed experience released him in a wonderfully new way. In the strength of this, Frank Laubach went

on to develop a literacy movement that reached about sixty million people. He became known as the “Apostle of Literacy” to millions who could neither read nor write.

Speaking of the grain of corn, Jesus says: *“But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”* This is not only a law of nature, it is a glorious law of the spiritual life. So, a word of encouragement: don’t be too surprised if your life is breaking up, and you are facing huge disappointments and set-backs. Take heart, for God may well be at work. He seems to love to use broken things; crucified things.

- In Mark 14 the jar of precious ointment had to be broken before the perfume spilled out and before Jesus could be anointed.
- In John 6 the boy’s loaves and fish had to be broken and blessed, before the crowd could have a meal.
- In John 12 Jesus teaches that his followers must also fall into the ground and die.
- In Psalm 51 we read that God accepts the sacrifice of a broken heart.

Yes, the Lord seems to love to use broken things. For most of us the act of crucifixion will be painful. But the Lord permits it because he loves us, and longs for us to fulfil our full potential. By the grace of God, this daily dying can become a glorious thing.

No two people are the same. This “breaking” can begin to happen to us in different ways and at different times. It can happen at the moment of conversion, or later on as God does some deeper work of grace in our lives. Perhaps this is what is happening to you as you read this? But we need to face the truth about ourselves. By nature we object to this breaking. We don’t like it one little bit! Our natural tendency is to resist things like death and brokenness. It’s the last thing on earth we want. And you and I will go to enormous lengths to avoid this – we don’t by nature want to be broken. The Master calls us every day to come and die. But just like the grain of corn in the tomb, we have a protective husk which can impede our growth. Yes of course, Frank Laubach may well have made an excellent University President. But in order to reach millions, first he had to die. It’s a law of the spiritual life: the corn of wheat has to fall into the ground and die.

Now, I want us to push this analogy a little further. Let’s call our protective

layer the **“Husk of Self”**. It’s the husk which can prevent the life of Jesus producing growth and greater usefulness in our lives. This tough husk of self will resist anything that might break us. What I am suggesting is that, one way or another, we all need to be softened and broken. And when the conditions are right, every one of us can produce a harvest for God. Never doubt that for a moment. Each of us is capable of doing huge amounts of good for the Kingdom of God, even those whom the world may write off as failures and hopeless cases. The good news is that God can do amazing things through the misfits and castoffs of society.

Think of some of the ways the husk of self can be broken:

- Sometimes by great beauty, especially the beauty of God’s love. His love for us takes our breath away, and completely rearranges our priorities.
- Sometimes by painful experiences of personal failure, when we see how deceptive our hearts can be.
- And sometimes, as with Frank Laubach, by bitter disappointments.
- The early Methodists often experienced this in the deep and searching fellowship they found in the Band Meetings.

Indeed, we find that the Lord can use anything to make us more Christ-like and more useful in his service. St Paul’s experience of personal weakness and suffering leads him to affirm, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* (Romans 8v 28.) Paul is not saying that all things are good, but that God is such a Sovereign King, that he can turn everything and anything for our good. In fact, there is nothing in your life he cannot use.

[As an act of faith and commitment, I invite you to say the following prayer: “Lord, I thank you that there is nothing you cannot use to bless me. You can use whatever life can throw at me!”]

However, as we have said, by nature, we resist this. Usually it is not very pleasant. It is painful and we tend to kick against it. The picture of Jesus being broken, alone in the Garden of Gethsemane is not a pretty sight. Nor is the obscenity of death by crucifixion. But he knows that if the seed does not die it abides alone. The Lord was able to endure the cross because of *“the joy set*

before him." (Hebrews 12v 2.)

The choice seems to be in our hands: if we are to be of greater usefulness in God's Kingdom, then we have no option – we too must be broken. We are called to make the choice: to ask God to break us. This is the longing expressed in the song, "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. ... Break me, melt me, mould me, use me." In the Covenant Service we put it this way:

"I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will: put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you Let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal."

(Methodist Worship, p 290.)

The grains of corn in Egypt lay there for 3,000 years, and were more or less useless and wasted. And so are we until we die to self. It is one of the laws of the spiritual life. It's almost as if you and I need to be converted over and over again.

CHAPTER 6

LET US LOOK AT TWO OF THE HARD HUSKS IN US
THAT NEED TO BE CONTINUALLY BROKEN.

(1) **The husk of self-centredness.** Most would agree that self-centred people are not much use in the Kingdom of God. Indeed, this attitude is the antithesis of the Christ-centred life. If we are to run the race with perseverance, we need to lay this aside.



Picture a baby in the pram: she thinks the world revolves around her. And whenever she wants her food, she wants it NOW! She will howl and throw her toys out of the pram until she is fed. Everything else in the whole wide world must stop. Nothing else is of any importance. And we smile when we see this understandable behaviour in little children. We usually smile and say, "Ah,

look, she takes after her father!” And everyone laughs. However, this joke is very near the knuckle, for we frequently bring this self-centred attitude into adulthood. Some adults always expect to have their own way, and we can act as if the whole world must stop what it's doing and jump to meet our needs.

- I must have the biggest piece of cake.
- The best car.
- The best house, sports equipment, computer, and so on.
- The worship in my church must only be done to fit in with my tastes.
- It doesn't really matter how many people suffer hunger, it's my money and I can spend it as I please.

Like the little baby in the pram, we act as if the whole world exists just to meet our own personal wishes. And when we don't get our way, we throw our toys out of the pram. More Christian churches and homes have been spoiled by adults behaving like this, than we care to say. The sound of angry people flinging their toys on the floor is heard among Christian leaders from time to time. In saying this, let me hasten to add, I am not pointing the finger at others. For I find evidence of this old hard husk of self-centredness at work in my own life more times than I wish to admit. I can catch myself being pushed along by downright selfish motives. I am appalled. I'm supposed to be a Christian minister, yet look at what I've just said!! “Lord, I'm acting like a spoiled child. When am I ever going to grow up? Lord, break this husk again.” And remember, the Disciples were not much better. Luke tells us that even after the Last Supper, after Jesus had spoken of his impending death, some of them were arguing about who was the greatest! How sad! Jesus was about to pour out his life for others, and they could only think of themselves.

So what are we to do? Well, you and I need to learn to recognise these flaws in ourselves and not to gloss over them. This is never easy. Jesus taught us that it is so much easier to see the “speck” in someone else's eye than the “plank” in our own. We can point critically to others and accuse them of acting in selfish ways, while remaining notoriously blind to our own failings.

However, we sense that all is not well within our hearts when a sour spirit takes over us. For example, we may find it a challenge to respond in a Christ-like way to situations in which others are praised and we are passed over. Perhaps we have spent our time and energy trying to serve God, but we

find that others get the praise and we are overlooked. The negative voice in our head says, "You see, they do not appreciate you. They are forever taking advantage of you!" Now, of course we cover it up on the outside, but inwardly we replay the old sour record in our head. We can be eaten up for years with a sour, bitter spirit. Could this be the reason why we make such slow progress along the pathway of Holiness? Is this husk of self-centredness preventing others from seeing Jesus in us day by day? What is the answer to this weakness in us? How can this husk be broken?

If I am right, and if the choice is in our hands, then there are steps we need we take. My experience is that there is no quick-fix! It will entail the slow but amazing path of spending time with the Lord on a daily basis. Yes, we trust there will be many in-fillings of the Holy Spirit, many "Second Blessings" and many anointings. But at the back of all this, there will be the daily discipline of listening for God to speak to us through the Bible. Daily, as we meditate on God's Word, and use the "Means of Grace", the Holy Spirit will be our interpreter and guide.

As we discovered in the first part of this booklet, John Wesley stressed this aspect of the life of holiness to such an extent that his critics accused him of teaching a salvation by works. It did not deter him. In a world today that demands instant solutions and short-cuts to achieve our goals, we need to affirm that those, and only those, who *"wait on the Lord will ... run and not be weary."* (Isaiah 40v 31.) We also affirm that there is no place in the Kingdom of God for things like self-centredness. And while we will continue to thank God for Spirit-filled experiences, will find that he usually employs the drip-feed method to propel us along the path. Bit by bit self is being crucified with Christ. That's the husk of self-centredness. The Lord will reveal to us if this has been hindering our usefulness in the Kingdom.



(2) The Husk of Self-defence. This is another hard shell that needs to be broken and laid aside. Or, if you like, it's the "sack" that prevents us from running the race as we wish we could. What we are looking at here is the attitude that prompts us to justify our behaviour, however outlandish, when we are challenged. And the danger with this is that we can become incapable of receiving necessary correction from others. If I am always trying to defend myself, then I'm not listening. If you are at all like me, few things seem to be more natural than to immediately try to defend our actions. When we claim to be "just standing up for our rights", or "setting the record straight", or "defending my good name," we are often simply trying to justify an un-Christian attitude. I do this without thinking. It is second nature to me. For example, my wife Ruth gently points out that I'm breaking the speed limit. I'm driving at 60 MPH in a 30 MPH zone. If the police catch me I'll be fined. What do I instinctively do? I blame the driver behind me, or in front of me. Or I suggest that if she hadn't spent so much time getting ready we would not need to be in such a hurry! Are you like this? How do you react when you feel you are being corrected or accused? Yes, you defend yourself. We feel that self-defence is almost an honourable thing. As a result, we face the danger of becoming incapable of receiving correction, and we persist in sinful ways.

What is the remedy? What steps can we take to lay aside this sinful desire to justify ourselves? Well, I suggest that it requires a much deeper form of accountability than exists in most churches today. We need to give others the authority to speak truthfully to us about our walk with God. This was the powerful insight which John Wesley discovered as he sought to harvest the fruits of the 18th Century Revival. He saw that those who were serious in their desire to live holy lives needed like-minded people who were willing to speak truth into our lives on a regular basis. The early Methodists kept what was said in the Bands in strict confidence, and even developed a reaction of gratitude when others told them their faults. Do we today not also need to be held accountable for our actions? If it is the truth they are sharing with us, then we need to hear it. However, this ability to give and receive guidance is indeed a rare grace among Christians. Sadly, we are often so quick to justify our behaviour that we make it very difficult for others to lovingly come and tell us our faults. This in turn makes us afraid to help others to become aware of the risks they are running, and of the possible harmful effects of their behaviour. We remain silent for we are fearful that they may misunderstand

our attempts to assist them in their walk with God. And because we are not good at this, many followers of Jesus can wander from the pathway, with no one able to act as a guide.

I'm convinced that one of the reasons why the fire burned so brightly in the hearts of the early Methodists was that this system of accountability was built into their weekly fellowship meetings. Wesley seems to have based his Band Meetings partly on his experience of the Holy Club at Oxford, his experience of Moravian fellowship groups, and especially on James 5v 16,

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." The searching questions they asked each other may shock us today, but they give us an insight into their desire to be broken before God, and to smash through the walls of self-defence. Like St Paul, they longed to be crucified with Christ. While some people today complain of the prurient nature of such questions, others sense that this depth of spirituality was the reason why God was able to use them so powerfully to change the direction of the Christian Church in the 18th Century. The husk of self-defence was well and truly being smashed.

What is our response to all this? We have looked at self-centredness and self-defence as two of the things which can impede Christians as we seek to grow in holiness. What might be an authentic response?

- Do we simply toss our head in the air and go on in the same old way?
"I'm perfectly happy with the way things are."
- "I'm not prepared to open myself to others like this."

Of course, no one has the right to force us to do these things. However, at times we sense God's call to a much deeper intimacy with our Saviour.

- We begin to acknowledge a hunger within us: "Surely following Jesus must be better than this?"
- Am I really living the kind of life that led Jesus to come from heaven and die on a cross? Is this what he had in mind?
- Can I not find someone to whom I can be accountable?

I suspect that from time to time we all have dreams of doing something

beautiful for God. We sense that he has something far, far more wonderful than we are experiencing at present. "If only I could start out again?"

May I suggest a new response?

- Let's have the courage to ask God to clear away the blockages, whatever they are. We have only looked at two. There can be many others.
- "Lord, do for me what you did for Frank Laubach: reveal the hindrances in my life; the pride that suggests I am better than others; my lack of love and compassion.
- It may take time, but let's begin to ask God to guide us to an "accountability partner."

Our prayer can be,

"Lord, whatever it takes; whatever my friends and loved ones may say; wherever it leads ... Please, come by the power of the Holy Spirit and fill my life again."

Mother Teresa of Calcutta said: "True holiness consists in doing God's will with a smile." Rev Dr Ken Wilson encourages us to recapture the lively attractiveness of Holiness. He recalls the scriptural teachings of John Wesley and brings a powerful contemporary challenge to live in a Christ-like way. Rev Dr K.A. Wilson is an Irish Methodist Minister who has served as a mission partner in the Caribbean, and is a past President of the Methodist Church in Ireland. His PhD thesis is entitled: "The Devotional Relationships and Interaction between the Spirituality of John Wesley, the Methodist Societies and the Book of Common Prayer." We are grateful to him for this practical help towards holy living.

Ken Todd – Chairman of Headway (Ireland)