

## JOHN WESLEY AND HIS CHALLENGE TO ALCOHOLISM

John Wesley's, 'Letter to an Alcoholic', reveals the unpleasant truth that the use of alcohol is, detrimental to persons and society. Utilizing the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, sociology and theology, undergirded by Scripture – launched a formidable attack against it and classified it as a social evil. Concerned about the value and well being of the whole person, each of whom was made in the image of God, Wesley made a personal plea for total abstinence. He was concerned that the habitual use of alcohol was a 'diabolical practice', which leveled a 'human' to the inferior state of an 'animal' and therefore, degraded the human personality. This is what he wrote:

**You are a human being! God made you human, but you have converted yourself into an animal. What is the difference between a human and an animal? Is it not, perhaps, reasoning and understanding? But you have wasted your ability to reason and divested yourself of understanding (Gonzalez, 1998:243).**

He makes the distinction between the human and animal to highlight the negation of self-hood and the debasement of Christian character, self-respect, dignity and worth. He was therefore unambiguous in his plea for total abstinence. He was concerned about the harm alcohol caused to the body and the soul.

Wesley's letter although very strong in tone, was intrinsically pastoral, because his primary purpose was to 'save souls' for Christ. He, therefore, called attention to the fact, that standards of behavior for the Christian must be different from that of society. The Christian must make a difference. The Christian should live out his/her faith and put his/her beliefs into practice.

Wesley truly cared about the human person and motivated by love, felt he must reach out to help. He saw for himself how intoxicated persons spoke and behaved and felt he should fight for sobriety in society. It was important to him that the people called, 'Methodist', should endeavor always to "better themselves" (Tabraham, 1995:3).

### **1. What is alcoholism?**

Alcoholism is a disease characterized by physical dependence upon alcohol and the inability to control drinking. I have no doubt Wesley accepted alcoholism as a disease, which affected the entire being of a person. When alcohol is consumed, it is absorbed immediately into the bloodstream and travels to all parts of the body. While it does not take long to consume, it takes a long time to get rid of it and that is what makes it dangerous. It affects, the total well being of the person, to the extent that if we understand the use of the term, 'spirituous liquor' with reference to alcohol, we can get a glimpse of the seriousness with which Wesley addressed this problem.

**You have saddened God's Spirit sending it further and further away from you; if there should remain some spark of kindness in your soul, you drown it and extinguish it immediately (Gonzalez, 1998:243).**

Wesley felt that if one is intoxicated with the 'spirituous liquor', alcohol, then in a real sense, there is no place for the God's Spirit! He makes his plea, appealing to the soul, the very depths of the being and vital core of the person. He can go no further. He has made his point, but he is not finished. He knows that no one is outside of the boundary of God's saving grace and love. Wesley's letter is a sensitive and caring letter, which reveals his empathic identification with a suffering alcoholic. In his view, the suffering alcoholic must assume the responsibility to reflect on his own sinful condition and realize

that in such a state he is so vulnerable, as to allow the devil to do his work.

**You are ready for the devil to do his work. You have stripped yourself of all goodness and virtue, and filled your heart with all that is evil, mundane, sensual and demonic. You have forced God's Spirit to depart from you, because you are not disposed to tolerate a reprimand, and you have given yourself like a blind person into the hands of the devil, permitting him to guide you according to his will (Gonzalez, 1998:243-244).**

In the latter part of the paragraph, Wesley return's to the theme of the alcoholic forcing God's Spirit to depart, hence the difficulty of his/her being ruled by the Spirit or be identified with the Spirit, so as to be called, 'a child of God'. The state of mind of the alcoholic is such, that there is difficulty to pay attention, listen and act wisely. For Wesley, such a life displays rebelliousness to the extent of that the person is unwilling to pay any attention to his/her condition, and listen to wise counsel, so as to act intelligently. Wesley, therefore felt, that an alcohol-saturated culture was both intolerable and inconceivable.

## **2. "The World is My Parish"**

Although Wesley's letter is written to an alcoholic person, Wesley's intention was multipurpose. His appeal was not just to the person, but, to society, the nation and the world. The Christian, wherever s/he may be in the world, is called upon to make a 'difference'. In the mind of Wesley, the state of drunkenness is repulsive, but the person should not be despised, however, lost. The Christian is called to assist to make the person make a commitment to change through the power of the Holy Sprit. For the person, who is 'lost in alcohol', has a chance of being 'lost in Christ'. It is important that we bear this in mind and keep before persons the 'Jesus of Nazareth, in whom we see

what God intends people to be' (Board of Discipleship, USA, 1983:6).

The challenge of Wesley to Christians throughout the world is to be, **all** Christian, not **almost** Christian. To him, the Christian alcoholic is anathema to Christianity.

**You cannot call yourself a Christian! You cannot call yourself human! You have sunken lower than the majority of beasts that are destined to perish. (Gonzalez, 1998:244)**

Wesley's call is in fact a challenge to all alcoholics, to wake up and act responsibly and, recognize, that there is need for transformation and change with their lifestyle. Wesley is concerned about the person salvaging his/her life and re-energizing that life usefully and meaningfully as a Christian. He recognizes, this is going to take tremendous will and courage on the part of the alcoholic, to be and to become, a new creation in Christ. He was not prepared to compromise his position of "abstinence" with "moderation", for he felt that becoming a new creation in Christ can be accomplished through belief in him and his transforming power to change lives. The urgency is for everyone to accept and follow Christ as Lord, Savior and Liberator, for as Liberator, he is able to free us from becoming slaves to sin and the societal structures of death and 'when this happens life is transformed and begins to bear the characteristics of the One who is being followed' (Job, 1998:76). According to Coleman (1990:66), ' "the Bible speaks of this transformation as a new birth, 'born of the Spirit' (John 3:3-8); 'born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:13; cf. 1 John 3:9; 4:7).

It is ‘a new creation; the old things pass away; behold, new things have come’ (2 Cor. 5:17). The old corrupted self is laid aside, and a new self is put on, “which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph. 4:22-24).’

In our contemporary society, some Methodists are calling for moderation in drinking alcohol, rather than total abstinence. The fact is, even with moderate drinking a person may experience dizziness, flushing, dulling of senses and impairment of coordination, reflexes, memory and judgment. There are many cases of domestic violence in which wives have been brutally beaten and abused because of an alcoholic husband. Innocent children are, sometimes ill-treated by, alcoholic fathers. In larger quantities alcohol may produce staggering, double vision, dulling of senses, mood changes and unconsciousness. Added to these are the crimes, suicides, divorces, drownings, vandalism, sexual assaults, personal injuries and road fatalities. These tell the story, hence, Wesley’s non-compromising stance for total abstinence.

### **3. Practicing What We Believe**

John Wesley’s letter to an alcoholic was a manifest indication of his concern for the welfare of the individual person and of a social gospel that reaches out to all. The letter is an encouragement to live out what we believe. Recognizing the misery and harm the consumption of alcohol, as a psychoactive drug, creates in a person’s life, Wesley was at pains, as revealed in this letter to help persons not to ruin their life with alcohol. He was able to see the scarred lives of many alcoholics, both Christian and non-Christian, and was determined that, because of the magnitude of this ‘evil’ and destructive disease, it should be repudiated and eradicated.

Wesley's letter was obviously written to a Christian alcoholic and to his sorrow, such a Christian was a, 'diseased person', who needed to rebuild his/her character, both ethically (conduct) and morally (distinguishing between the evil and the good). He expected that the Christian alcoholic, who was human and not an animal, would alter his/her behavior with the help of the Holy Spirit, since s/he and others had 'lost their spiritual strength, and have become as weak as unbelievers' (Holway, 1987:459). His intention was to provide positive moral guidance that would promote the "wellbeing" and "wholeness" of the person and help him/her live out, and therefore, put into practice their faith.

This raises again the debate between doctrine and discipline, and of their practical implications in terms of what we believe and how we behave. How can we effectively maintain a balance between our faith (what we believe) and our works (how we behave)? In this exercise of experimental and practical divinity, the dilemma to maintain a proper balance between the two on 'the scale of emphases' is difficult. John Wesley struggled with this dilemma throughout his ministry. He felt that the balance between, what we believe and how we behave, must have its starting point in sound Christian doctrine, which should motivate persons to Christian discipleship. This should be, for 'our discipleship is the practical living of our faith each day ' (Board of Discipleship, UMC, 1983:7). It was imperative to Wesley that persons should be aware that Christ offers a better life and that it was important to put that life into practice. Persons were therefore encouraged to strive to achieve and practice a life of Scriptural holiness.

We need to keep the balance between what we hold as beliefs (doctrinal truths) and how

we behave as Christians. When we are rooted in our doctrinal beliefs, we can make a difference to the way we think and behave. Wesley, in taking cognizance of the fact, that alcohol could alter the way a person thinks and behave was convinced that when a person is grounded in Christ, his/her beliefs should set the standard and outline the pattern of Christian conduct for his/her life. Beliefs (doctrines) should regulate our behavior (works). We need the two held together to preserve our 'wholeness' as persons. The basis of Wesley's point of view is Scriptural and Allen (1995:21) quite rightly reminds us that, 'in the Scriptures, the person is seen as a whole being. His or her wholeness, or health, involves harmony among body, mind and spirit, between the individual, the community and the ecosystem, as well as between the individual and God.'

#### **4. From Transformation to Restoration**

The fragmentation of the 'wholeness' of life, of any person, because of alcohol, is a human travesty. Do people in our contemporary societal environment care about their neighbor's struggle with alcohol? Some Christians today openly challenge the policy of the Methodist Church on the issue of prohibiting the sale and use of alcohol. Others require of the church, a deafening silence on this 'social evil'. This attitude is shocking and disappointing.

I had an uncle, a very nice person, who enjoyed drinking alcohol with friends. Today, he is dead! The cause – cirrhosis of the liver!

I had a friend, a very kind person, who enjoyed drinking alcohol with friends. Today, he is dead! The cause – cirrhosis of the liver!

These and others were preventable deaths. These men were Christians and knew better, but were not able to maintain the balance between belief and behavior, and allowed the habitual use of alcohol to lead them to their deaths. Truly, ‘many, many human tragedies have their cause there’ (Frost, 1952:90) and as a result, Wesley was concerned about the kind of friend that would encourage another friend to habitually consume alcohol to his death.

**What kind of friend is he who can support this, or even worse, persuade you to do it? They are criminals, they are your worst enemies. These are the category of friends who while smiling with you stick a dagger in your back. (Gonzalez, 1998:245).**

Wesley’s challenge then, is also a challenge for today. If we, who are called, “Methodist”, are to hold on to our Wesleyan heritage, alcohol is not to be held, sold, served, or consumed on Methodist premises. We must encourage and persuade men and women, boys and girls, to live a life that is alcohol free. We must do nothing that will cause your brother or sister to fall physically and/or spiritually. We must think only of our neighbor’s good. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis, 4:9). Yes, we are our brother’s keeper. Yes, we are your sister’s keeper. We are all called, in the spirit of Christ, to share in helping and building each other up. The challenge is for us to put this into practice, by seeking to live holy, disciplined lives, away from alcohol. None of us ‘can escape responsibility for the needs of another. In Wesley’s view we are our brothers’ keeper, and as long as there is one person in need, no Christian can rest content’



(Job, 1998:68). Charles Wesley eloquently expresses this view in the first two stanzas of his hymn:

**Help us to help each other, Lord,  
Each other's cross to bear,  
Let each his friendly aid afford,  
And feel his brother's care.**

**Help us to build each other up,  
Our little stock improve;  
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,  
And perfect us in love.  
(MHB, 1933:626, No. 717, vs. 1,2)**

Alcohol with all its perils, is a dangerous 'social evil'. Is there any cure for it? Yes, 'there is only one cure – not to touch it all; and our example is their (**our friends**) greatest help' (Frost, 1952:90). That is what genuine friendship is all about and if we are to be true friends to this present and other generations, we must intentionally let it be known that alcohol drinking is dangerous.

It has been particularly dangerous for young people, who are still developing in mind and body, especially in the areas of driving and sexual behavior. Many have died while under the influence of alcohol and many have killed innocent victims for the same reason. In addition, many teenage pregnancies have been due to lost of control while under the influence of alcohol. Neither the mature nor the young, however, should live in despair, because alcoholism is a treatable illness and 'change' in the life of every person is possible through Christ.

John and his brother, Charles, lived in poverty and spent long hours in meditation, prayer and reading the Scriptures, yet, something was missing in their lives, although they did everything to win God's favor by good works and efforts toward holy living. Then came John Wesley's heart-warming experience at Aldersgate. This was, in my humble opinion, his ultimate Christian spiritual experience. It was the radical turning point - the change dynamic factor of his life, and this experience of 'conversion', led him to recognize that God loved him unconditionally. The belief, that he was a child of God, loved by God and forgiven of his sins, is reflected in, 'The Wesleys' Conversion Hymn':

**O how shall I the goodness tell,  
Father, which Thou to me hast showed?  
That I, a child of wrath and hell,  
I should be called a child of God,  
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,  
Blest with this antepast of heaven!  
(MHB, 1933:321, No. 361 v. 2)**

This "heart-warming experience" of Wesley, gave balance to his belief that he was, 'a **slave redeemed from death and sin,**' because Christ had died for him, even him. It was therefore his view that, what Christ had done for him, he could do for others.

**Amazing love! How can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!  
(MHB, 1933:328, No. 371, part of v. 1)**

Amazing love, indeed, for Wesley became a new creation in Christ, and one who felt he should allow the world to see, a practical demonstration of his love for God and neighbor.

He felt that his “heart-warming experience” should remain kindle within by faith and that his life should manifest itself in daily conduct. He, therefore, endeavored to proclaim sound Christian doctrine and live a life of holiness.

Wesley felt a great compulsion to tell all persons about Jesus Christ and his saving grace. If change is to take place in the life of an alcoholic, he was certain, based on his own experience of conversion and salvation, that repentance was necessary:

**Repent! Look at yourself and see how wretched you are. Ask God to convince you to the depths of your being. How often have you returned to crucify the Son of God and expose him to public share! Pray that you may get to know yourself inwardly and outwardly, with all your sin, your guilt and your weakness, (Gonzalez, 1998:243).**

Wesley, although he knew that in every life there were faults and sins, he was hopeful. He was certain that Jesus Christ was able to save to the uttermost. No one was lost forever. So, in this letter he called upon his reader to repent, to change his/her way of thinking and behaving, as well as to a change of mind and attitude. He assured all his readers that Christ loved them and would forgive them. He appealed to their heart, mind and conscience.

‘Look at yourself...’ Christ loves you. Seek his way. Walk his walk. Talk his talk. Do what is right. Do his will. Wesley knew, ‘repentance was far more than mere remorse,’ (Tabraham, 1995:35) and that it required being clothed with the mind of Christ, which must lead to transformation of life and commitment to discipleship with Christ.

In conclusion, Wesley was convinced that the alcoholic person could be rescued and saved. Such a person was 'diseased' and required healing. Alcohol was, therefore, dangerous to both the person and society, and as such, it was a social evil. The Christian must make a difference in society, hence, each should practice total abstinence without compromising his/her beliefs. Beliefs and conduct, doctrine and behavior adhere together. The Christian should practice what s/he believes. Change of a person's life is possible through Christ, he is able to transform us and to restore us. Christ is truly able to save. To illustrate the point, allow me to briefly remind you of the story of the prodigal. The prodigal shattered and ruined much of his life in riotous living in a far-off land. He reflected on his ways, and, in his shame, wept sorrowfully and bitterly. He grieved, but did more than that, he came to his senses, repented, rose up and returned to his father's home, where he received his father's forgiveness. Let us not forget that, '...forgiveness, reconciliation, deliverance, restoration and personality renewal all bring healing of the spirit' (Allen, 1995:10) and rightly so, for Christ by his life, death and resurrection, has already won the victory over our sins on Calvary's cross. Like the prodigal, the alcoholic is challenged to reflexion and action, faith and works, because transformation and restoration are possible in Christ. All can hold firmly to this belief and rise to the challenge to put it into practice, by seeking to live a holy, disciplined life of Christian discipleship, away from alcohol.

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## **BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LESLEY G ANDERSON**

The Rev. Dr Lesley G Anderson was born in the Republic of Panama and attended secondary school on the former Canal Zone. Responding positively to the call to ministry he has served the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas as Superintendent of a Circuit, Secretary of a Synod and Chairman of a District on two previous occasions. He also served the British Methodist Church as Area Secretary for the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe.

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## ABSTRACT

The title given to this essay is, **John Wesley and His Challenge to Alcoholism**, and it deals specifically with John Wesley's, 'Letter to an Alcoholic'. The letter reveals the unpleasant truth that the use of alcohol is detrimental to persons and society, so Wesley, vehemently opposed what he classified as a 'social evil'.

This essay is made up of an introduction, four major areas of thought and a conclusion.

**The Introduction** sets out the view, that Wesley utilized very well the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, sociology and theology, undergirded by Scripture, to make his case that life is sacred and the human body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, therefore, the consumption of alcohol lowered 'human dignity' to the level of a beast.

1. **What is alcoholism?** In this essay, alcoholism as understood by Wesley is a disease characterized by physical dependence upon alcohol and the inability to control drinking. Ultimately, the drinking of alcohol was detrimental to both body and soul.
2. **"The World is My Parish?"** Wesley's, 'Letter to an Alcoholic', was a letter to all Christians to make a 'positive difference' in the world.
3. **Practicing What We Believe** sets out Wesley's formidable challenge in practical divinity to maintain a balance between what we believe and how we behave.
4. **From Transformation to Restoration** speaks of Wesley's conversion experience and of his view that in Christ, each human life can be transformed and restored, to live a holy, disciplined life of Christian discipleship.

**The Conclusion**, reaffirms that each life on the way to destruction can be rescued and saved through Christ.