



Francis of Assisi and John Wesley Capture the Gospel

We are currently seeing two trends developing in the church and among people who are pursuing spiritual growth. There are those who are constantly pursuing new ideas, new concepts, new studies. They can get so enamored with the pursuit of knowledge, that living it out almost falls to the wayside; and a life of union with Christ gets forgotten in the shuffle. On the other hand, there are many who feel that all we need to do is perform acts of service or be involved in as many community projects as possible. They believe that outward activity is a sign of inward life, but that is not necessarily the case, as the quote from Meister Eckhart points out.

Throughout history there have been personalities or movements that recognized that a full message regarding the gospel of the kingdom means that there is an inner spiritual reality that naturally results in outer displays of the love and life of God that impacts all of society and creation. Two individuals who embodied this wholeness in their own lives and in the movements that sprung out of their life and teaching were Francis of Assisi and John Wesley.

Francis of Assisi's Friars Minor movement was characterized by such a level of joy in God that Francis referred to them as the Jongleurs de Dieu (Tumblers of God). They were people whose spiritual debt had been completely removed, so they were free to live a life of spiritual frivolity—as people who were able to live in joy, happiness, and peace.

Francis believed that every part of life could be used to tell the story of Jesus. The gospel is to be seen in everything that we do. One of his more famous quotes is: "Every day preach a sermon. If necessary, use words." This belief that the story was to be seen was the primary motivator when Francis set up the first ever Nativity Scene. He wanted people to see the reality of the incarnation and the simplicity of Christ at a time when religion was getting more and more complicated and expensive.

There was no shortcut for living out the gospel. Mere pursuit of concepts was not enough. Theology meant a knowledge of and union with Jesus Christ that was manifested through the life of a community of believers. If Francis were alive today, I believe he would tell us that posting spiritual ideas or liking spiritual posts on Facebook is NOT the same thing as investing in the lives of others or being in active community with other believers.

Everything mattered to Francis—from preaching to the animals, to touching lepers when no one wanted to go near them, to seeking advice from women when women were still considered as lower members of society—and he believed that ministering to every person and to every part of creation was to participate in the act of reconciliation and recreation. As we have been seeing in our most recent series, Francis saw that the story of God in the world began at Genesis 1 and not Genesis 3—that means that we are called to be participants with God in ministering to every person who has been made in God's image, and in shepherding or stewarding the earth and every part of creation!

In the same way, nearly 500 years later, John Wesley brought a message of personal encounter with Jesus Christ that was so powerful that it could "strangely warm" the heart of each person. For Wesley, like Francis, an encounter with Jesus was so powerful that it would cause a spiritual awakening and renewal that would impact every area of life and society.

Wesley saw the problems of the church in his day (much like it is easy to fixate on the problems of the church in our day), but instead of getting bogged down in criticism, he began the work of building something new that would impact all of British society as a display of the kingdom of God.



The outward work will never be puny if the inward work is great. And the outward work can never be great or even good if the inward work is puny or of little worth. The inward work invariably includes in itself all breadth, all expansiveness, all length, all depth. Such a work receives and draws all its being from nowhere else except from and in the heart of God.

— Meister Eckhart
(1260-1328)

You have as much learning as
you put into practice, and
you are as good a preacher
as you do what you say.

Wesley was a completely dedicated academic and theologian. He believed that study and understanding were absolutely essential for spiritual growth; so much so, that he edited seventy spiritual and theological classics from the Early Fathers up to his day for his Methodist traveling preachers. But all of this was leading to what he termed “Christian perfection” or what the early church fathers called theosis—attaining to union with God. For Wesley, study and learning were not to occur in a spiritual vacuum but they were seen as aids to spiritual union with Christ.

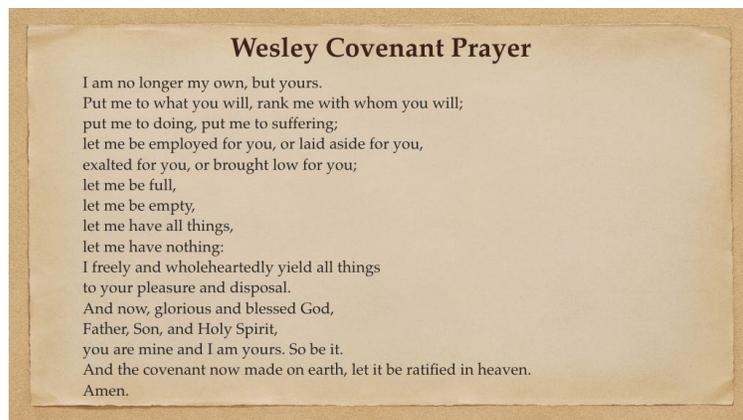
And the Wesleyan revival ultimately erupted in social reform on a massive scale. Like Francis, Wesley insisted on the importance of each person because each person is made in the image of God and is someone for whom Christ died.

In the seventh century, Isaac the Syrian described the *Eleimon* heart—a heart that is full of the compassion of God—in this way: We have love “for human beings, birds, wild animals, demons, and every creature on earth. An extreme empathy toward the whole of Creation renders such a heart incapable of hearing of any hurt or even a minor sorrow taking place within Creation. For this reason, the Eleimon heart offers prayers for the beasts and for the birds of prey, for animals and demons, for serpents, and for everything else within Creation, including the enemies of truth.” This is a far-reaching compassion that reflects a full understanding of the love of God that is manifested through his people on earth.

Wesley’s revival impacted education, child labor laws, animal welfare (the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and subsequently the ASPCA, started out of the Wesleyan revival), prison reform, health care reform, and the quest to end slavery throughout the world, among many other parts of society.

Both Francis of Assisi and John Wesley saw and understood the gospel of the kingdom in all its fullness. They both allowed it to be large and expansive, and they both lived it out in their times and cultures. The results impacted every aspect of their respective societies. They lived as bearers of the image of God—what Brian McLaren calls “apprentice artists” who participate with God in the ongoing act of creation.

What would such a life wholly dedicated to living and sharing the gospel of the kingdom look like in our day?



For Reflection:

- What are some things that we might be able to learn from Francis of Assisi? From John Wesley?
- What parts of their activity and message stand out to you as truly embodying the fullness of the gospel of the kingdom?
- What might be some characteristics of “image bearers” or “artist apprentices” in our day? What parts of Wesley’s Covenant Prayer especially strike you? Why?