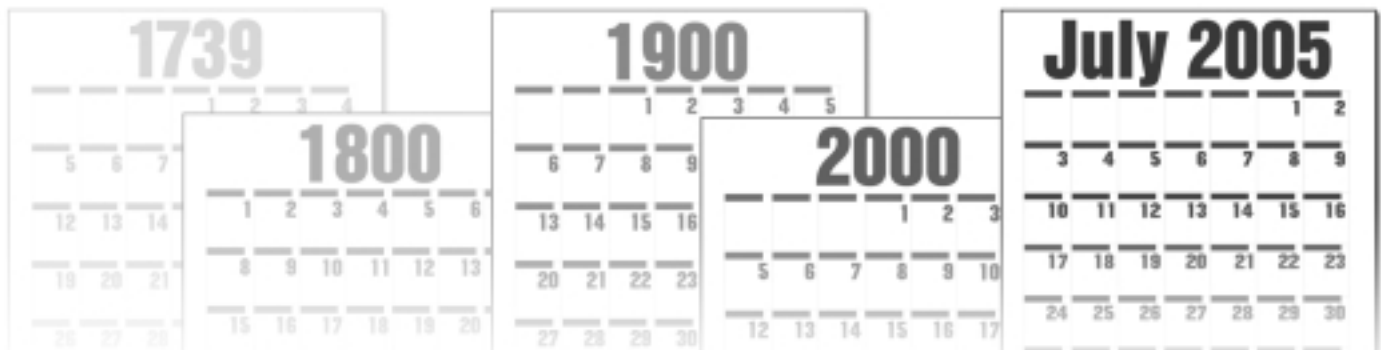


Is the Call to Holy Living Passé?



L. Gregory Jones

My task was to lead a group of supervising elders in a discussion of “ethics” for them to use with their probationers. The person in charge suggested I might use some cases to get them thinking about the “hard decisions” pastors have to make and to be sure that issues of sexual and financial misconduct would be a part of the discussion.

I understood the concern. After all, I was aware there had been several high-profile cases within that annual conference in recent years involving either sexual or financial misconduct by clergy.

Somehow, though, the request seemed neither to fit my own understanding of what was most needed nor to be the most engaging way to work with these supervising elders. Recalling my own vows of ordination as an elder, I proposed that instead we focus on what it means to “know” and “keep” the General Rules of our Church. The leader agreed.

Alas, many of the supervising elders in the group could not recall the General Rules, nor were they very conscious of their responsibility both to know and keep them. Yet as we opened up the *Discipline* to focus on the passages that both describe the origins of the General Rules as well as their actual content, a marvelous conversation developed. We began talking about what it means to avoid evil, to do all the good you can, and what a disciplined attention to the means of grace might mean for Christian life—for clergy and laity alike.

Our discussion turned in interesting directions. We talked about the kind of life that people yearn for, the relevance of particular practices and disciplines to being able to live that kind of life, the importance of habits and virtues to sustain a good life, and the significance of communities of support and accountability for encouraging those practices, disciplines, habits, and virtues. The participants were surprised they were so engaged by the discussion. They were pleased to find it so directly related to their own practice of ministry.

We were, as a matter of course, beginning to talk about a call to holy living. But had I begun by saying we were going to talk about “holiness,” or even “holy living,” wariness and defensiveness would likely have set in. Why? Because many of us have experienced the predicament of “holiness” being reduced to petty moralism, of the call to sanctity being replaced by self-righteous sanctimony. Christian life, especially within American Methodism, has too often been reduced to a list of “do’s” and “don’ts” from which we have wanted to flee.

I recall my maternal grandfather, a Methodist minister in the Iowa Conference, telling me that his father (also a Methodist

minister) had forbid him from playing cards as a child. So, of course, my grandfather developed a great love for cards that he passed along to his kids and grandkids. More recently, many in my parents' generation were warned about the dangers of going to motion pictures because of their potential for sinfulness. The lists change, but too often the pettiness remains central.

Such moralism has become even more troubling in contemporary American Christianity than such quaint examples suggest. For example, in our day one side of a divisive debate about sexuality makes arbitrary appeals to Leviticus in support of its views; the other side counters by citing other passages to show that we don't follow the holiness code in other respects, so why should we about sex? As a result, the two sides begin to mirror each other.

Regrettably, neither side asks what role Leviticus might play in a deeper understanding of Scripture's witness. Or, better put, we have lost the capacity for thoughtful reflection on Scripture's call to holy living—and how that might reframe conversations we need in the church, not only about sexuality but also about the environment, economics, war and peace, family, and the kinds of virtues, friendships, and practices needed to sustain careful discussion in which our words are appropriate to the Word.

Yet many people are yearning for meaningful guidance on how to discover "the life that really is life" (1 Timothy 6:19). There is a hunger abroad in the culture and among many Christians in the churches to discover a sense of holy living. Unfortunately, because we in the Wesleyan tradition have neglected our own best insights, we have not had much to offer to people. Indeed, many of the books on "spirituality" that appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list, superficial and weak as they often are, stand as a judgment on the churches for our failure to address the yearning many people are feeling.

What is this yearning? Often it is that lurking, inchoate sense of brokenness people sense in their souls that things just aren't the way they're supposed to be. This is as true of personal lives as it is of the painful awareness of social and sys-

temic divisions and brokenness in the world. The sense that "things are not the way they're supposed to be" can inspire profoundly transformative social witness. But people need the means by which to be enabled, inspired, and empowered to see the possibilities for that witness. Absent those means, people will be caught by a yearning that they don't know how to satisfy.

We should not be surprised by this yearning since Augustine reminded us long ago that our hearts would be restless until they rest in God. There is a God-shaped void in our lives when we live out-

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side the realm of the communion for which we were intended. When that void begins to be filled, we discover the signs of life on which we will stake our lives.

How does that void begin to be filled? The Wesleyan movement embodies rich insights and practices that we do well to emulate and creatively adapt in our own time and diverse cultural settings. Our Wesleyan forbears recognized and took seriously the reality of sin and brokenness in the world and in people's lives, even as they also expressed great hope for the possibilities of new life in Christ. The Wesleys recognized there is no personal holiness without social holiness.

In recognizing both the realities of sin and the possibilities of new life, our Wesleyan forbears recognized the importance of small groups of people who would offer accountability and support to one another in discipleship. They became "holy friends" to one another—not a superficial North American notion of "friendliness," but holy friendships that cut across conventional lines. In these small discipleship groups, guided by the work of the Holy Spirit in processes of discernment, holy friends challenged the

sins that one another had come to love, affirmed the gifts that each had been afraid to claim, and helped one another dream dreams they otherwise would not have dreamed.

They also recognized that words matter. They paid attention to what they should and should not say to one another, cultivating patterns of redemptive speech and silence. They recognized that the emotions need to be formed well if we are not only to do good but also to be rightly disposed toward the Good. They saw that the law is a gift in Christian life, shaping faithful living. They understood what it means to be connected in Christ.

Interestingly, these early Wesleyans were articulating and embodying insights about moral formation that are found in such diverse sources as Aristotle and the patterns and practices of the early church. They are insights that people are yearning for and that offer prospects for healing and hope within divided churches as well as in the diverse cultural settings in which United Methodists find ourselves.

In the historic questions asked of candidates for ordination in The United Methodist Church, the ordinands indicate that they know the General Rules and will keep them. These answers follow an affirmation of faith in Christ and a willingness to strive for perfection. Hence, the General Rules are placed in the context of the call to "holiness of heart and life," to manifesting "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts." This is a reminder that, for Wesleyans, holy living is central. Such a vocation comes to us as a gift of grace as we grow in our relationship with Christ. A Wesleyan sense of holy living not only is not passé, it is the way we live out our discipleship.

To be sure, a call to holy living won't offer a quick fix to any of our problems or predicaments. But a fresh inquiry into the shape and texture of authentic holiness might reframe important questions so that we can find paths forward beyond the polarizations that divide us and in which we too often simply mirror cultural assumptions. What might such reframing look like?

How careful are we with our language about the nature and purpose of

human life and what it means to live in communion with God? Do we use language that is designed to cultivate an awareness of the Spirit's work in conforming us to Christ and language that supports the kind of "meaningful disagreements" that hold us together? What might it mean for us to "love our enemies" as we seek to pattern holy living according to God's holiness?

Rather than turning so quickly to "hot-button" topics that divide people, how might we begin to explore the shape of holy communities and holy lives? What stories should we tell about such communities and people, both in dramatic faithfulness as well as in the grace of ordinary life? What stories are found in Scripture, and how might that shape our discernment about God's work in the world and in human life?

How might we think about Christian education differently if moral and spiritual formation geared toward holy living were central? How

might we integrate themes of friendship, practices, virtues, law, and habits into the patterns of nurturing Christian life?

How might we think about faithful Christian witness in the world if we recognized more fully the interplays of personal and social holiness, including the complicated dynamics of words, emotions, and actions in those interrelations? How might we think about our engagements in the community and the world as integral expressions of discipleship, rather than simply as "doing good"?

What would it look like if our patterns of Christian initiation drew more from the early church's patterns of catechesis, which typically took from two to three years, than our current styles of both confirmation and "new member orientation"? After all, in his *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (section I, paragraph 10), Wesley himself drew connections between the catechesis of the early church and the structures of the Wesleyan class meetings.

How might the General Rules actually shape not only the lives of ordained elders but also the very patterns of Christian congregations?

Such questions are meant to be illustrative, not comprehensive. And they do not in any way exhaust or circumscribe the scope of Christian witness in the world. Even so, they do suggest that we might find paths forward if we are more explicitly attentive to the call from God that we find in Scripture and echoed so centrally in the Wesleyan tradition: that we become perfect as God is perfect (Matthew 5:48). □



L. Gregory Jones is dean of Duke Divinity School and professor of theology. He is the author of several books, including *Everyday Matters* (Abingdon Press).

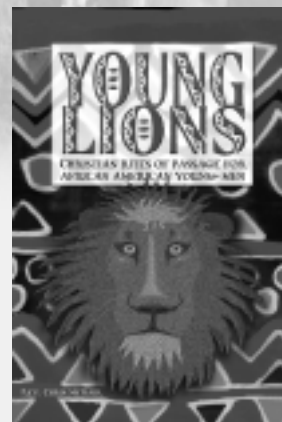
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