



SUSTAINING HEALTH

for

BOTH

BODY *and* SOUL

John Wesley's booklet *Primitive Physick* emphasized the importance of care for physical health as part of holistic ministry

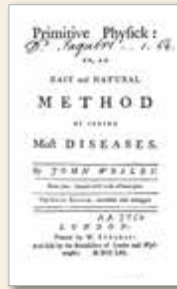
BY RANDY L. MADDOX

Recently a church-related college asked me to address its students about the value of their Methodist heritage. Hearing of the assignment, a colleague playfully asked, “What can a white-haired guy say about an 18th-century white-haired guy that would be of interest to college students today?” While acknowledging the challenges, I responded that this assignment resonated with my vocation as a scholar of Wesleyan traditions. As I waded into stacks of Wesley letters, pore over 18th-century newspapers, or try to ferret out John Wesley’s (frequently uncited!) sources in his publications, I certainly want to understand these materials in their historical location. But I also bring to this study a sense of our present setting. This sense often helps to discern the roots of challenges that still confront us; just as importantly, it can cast light on overlooked or undervalued resources in our heritage.

A good example is a booklet published in 1747 by John Wesley titled *Primitive Physick*, which lists over 300 illnesses, wounds, and other health issues and offers suggested treatments for each. The treatments are generally native herbs and naturally occurring elements, with scattered recommendations of cold-water bathing and mild electrical shock. When I began to focus on Wesley studies in the 1980s, this booklet was rarely mentioned—and if it was, it was cited as an example of Wesley’s credulity in depending upon folk remedies or the folly of meddling in a field where he did not belong. At this same time, calls were increasing in our culture for more holistic health care, and specifically for more attention to preventive care and promoting wellness. As I took up *Primitive Physick* in this setting, I was struck that Wesley’s preface to his collection of remedies culminated with a set of “plain, easy rules” for retaining health. This led me to explore Wesley’s interest in health and wellness more deeply in its context. The result was a growing conviction that Wesley’s publication of *Primitive Physick* was neither an idiosyncrasy nor merely a personal avocation. Rather, it reflected the heart of his understanding of salvation, was an abiding concern in his ministry, and was central to the mission of early Methodism.

INTEGRAL TO SALVATION

To begin with the first point, most Methodists recognize that John Wesley refused to limit salvation to forgiveness of sins and a guarantee of eternal blessing. He insisted that it also included through the work of the Spirit, “a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health ... the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and



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—“Large Minutes,” Q. 42

true holiness” (*Farther Appeal*, Pt. I, §3). They also know that Wesley had to defend this emphasis on present spiritual healing frequently, even to fellow revivalists like George Whitefield.

But fewer of his Methodist descendants are aware that John Wesley was just as insistent that the Great Physician’s unquestionable design is to “heal soul and body together,” to nurture “both inward and outward health” in this life (letter to Alexander Knox, Oct. 26, 1778). Wesley emphasized this point because so many in his day questioned it. Puritan theology had permeated English Christianity for over a century, fostering an understanding of providence that viewed calamity and disease as divinely intended, usually to teach a spiritual lesson. On these terms, one should not assume that God’s present design was physical healing; rather, God’s purpose in inflicting ailment was often specifically to remind us not to become too attached to earthly things like health. This broadly shared view can be found even in the hymns of John Wesley’s brother Charles; one framed as a prayer for parents whose child has smallpox, for example, affirms in the second stanza that “Love inflicts the plague severe” in order to “tear our hearts from earth away” (*Family Hymns* 1767, 76–78). This makes it all the more striking that at least a quarter of John’s private letters in his later

years include not only assurances to his correspondents that God desired their physical health, but also suggested treatments and frequent exhortations to practices of diet and exercise that can improve and sustain health.

ABIDING CONCERN OF WESLEY’S MINISTRY

None of these letters contain a hint that Wesley viewed his health advice as less important than his spiritual advice. This was in keeping with his training. Priests were often the only university-educated persons in 18th-century English villages. The newly dominant “Anglican” model of ministry elevated concern for the physical health of parishioners to a central aspect of pastoral care. While priests were not expected to dispense medicines or perform medical procedures, they were strongly encouraged to offer “physic”—general instruction in the nature of health and suggestions for sustaining or restoring it. To prepare priests for this role, basic medicine was part of their university studies.

From the diary that he began at Oxford, we know that Wesley read extensively in works about health. When he became a missionary priest in Georgia, he purchased a text on medicinal herbs native to the region. His desire to stay current was lifelong and included consultation of *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* and

Medical Transactions of the Royal College of Physicians.

After his return from Georgia, Wesley went to neither his old life as a fellow at Oxford nor a parish in the Church of England. Drawn into the emerging revival, he embraced the “more vile” ministry of open-air evangelism and caring for the growing cadres of followers. As he settled into this new role, Wesley noticed the numerous people (particularly the poor) in his audiences and society meetings who had health needs but little access to the parish priest or private physicians. Wesley’s pastoral concern drove him to offer them physic as well, belying any suggestion that he thought meeting their spiritual needs alone was sufficient. Initially he not only offered advice but also set up free clinics in Bristol and London where they could obtain medicines. As the Methodist movement spread across England, this form of ministry to the whole person proved unworkable. Wesley was rarely available to offer the benefit of his training in physic because of his itinerant leadership, and few of his lay preachers had appropriate training. So Wesley distilled his advice in *Primitive Physick*, which was reprinted frequently and sold at a minimal cost, as a companion to his spiritual guidance offered in collections of sermons. And he peppered his letters with advice on both spiritual and physical health.

IMBEDDED IN THE MISSION OF EARLY METHODISM

In keeping with his personal commitment, Wesley imbedded care for the whole person into the mission of early Methodism. He instructed his assistants (traveling lay preachers) to make sure that every society was supplied

not only with devotional writings but also with the *Primitive Physick*, “which ought to be in every house” (“Large Minutes,” Q. 42). And when it became necessary to shut down the clinics, he created the position of “visitor of the sick” in each society, with these responsibilities: “To see every sick person within his [or her] district thrice a week; To inquire into the state of their souls, and to advise them, as occasion may require; To inquire into their disorders, and procure advice for them; To relieve them, if they are in want” (*Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §XI.4).

HOLISTIC APPROACH TO HEALTH AND HEALING

Wesley bequeathed to his ecclesial descendants a strong precedent of caring for soul and body, both as a personal ideal and as a standard of ministry to others. He also modeled for them a holistic approach to physical health itself.

First, while he consistently affirmed the possibility of miraculous healing, Wesley avoided advocating prayer for healing without seeking medical care. This reflects his general convictions about divine-human agency, where faithful participation in the means God has provided is the ordinary way of “working out” what God is “working in” us.

Similarly, Wesley rejected accounts of health and healing that attended solely to either the physical or the spiritual dimension of human nature. In “Thoughts on Nervous Disorders,” for example, he chides physicians who assume that all troubled emotional states are natural disorders, thereby dismissing the possibility that some instances of remorse might be “the hand of God upon the soul” requiring

the healing effect of repentance and faith. But Wesley quickly adds that many emotional disorders are owing to inappropriate diet or insufficient exercise. His sermon “Heaviness through Manifold Temptations” develops this point pastorally, explaining to his followers that some of their spiritual heaviness is caused by bodily disorder, acute diseases, calamities, poverty, and so on, and should be dealt with accordingly.

Returning to my point of initial surprise with *Primitive Physick*, Wesley consistently prioritized natural preventive care. At the top of his list was the importance of regular exercise. As he put it in a letter to Peard Dickinson (June 15, 1789), “exercise is the best medicine” for recovering and sustaining health of both body and soul. In the preface to *Primitive Physick* (and scattered through his letters), Wesley also offered advice on diet, appropriate sleep, and cleanliness as central to preventive care.

When preventive care failed, the remedies that Wesley recommended for treating ailments were not the compound medicines favored by many physicians and apothecaries. He prioritized instead treatments that were widely and cheaply available, because he was concerned that basic care be available to the whole community—especially those who could not afford the emerging professionalized care of the modern age.

LIVING WELL AND DYING WELL

For all of his encouragement to cultivate the health of body and soul that God desired for them to enjoy, Wesley considered it a distinctive mark of his Methodist people that they die well. They knew that this life, while deeply valuable, was a penultimate state. We

are meant to reside ultimately in God's loving presence. Therefore, they did not fear death or struggle desperately to cling to life as it faded. Rather, they gloried in all that God had done, and

affirmed with Wesley that, in death, "the best of all is, God is with us."

This balance, like Wesley's holistic understanding of salvation and holistic approach to health and healing, is

surely part of our heritage worth celebrating—and appropriately emulating in our own discipleship and ministry. ■



SOME OF THE REMEDIES FROM JOHN WESLEY'S *Primitive Physick*

ON DIET

All pickled, or smoked, or salted food, and all high-seasoned, is unwholesome.

For studious persons, about eight ounces of animal food, and twelve of vegetable, in twenty-four hours, is sufficient. Water is the wholesomest of all drinks; quickens the appetite, and strengthens the digestion most.

Malt liquors (except clear small beer, or small ale of due age) are exceeding hurtful to tender persons.

Tender persons should eat very light suppers, and that two or three hours before going to bed.

ON EXERCISE

A due degree of exercise is indispensably necessary to health and long life. Walking is the best exercise for those who are able to bear it; riding for those who are not. The open air, when the weather is fair, contributes much to the benefit of exercise.

Those who read or write much should learn to do it standing; otherwise it will impair their health.

The fewer clothes any one uses, by day or night, the hardier he will be.

REMEDIES FOR SPECIFIC AILMENTS

THE ASTHMA

Cut an ounce of stick Liquorice into slices. Steep this in a quart of water, four and twenty hours, and use it, when you are worse than usual, as common drink. I have known this to give much ease.

A COUGH

Every cough is a dry cough at first. As long as it continues so, it may be cured by chewing immediately after you cough, the quantity of pepper-corn of Peruvian bark. Swallow your spittle as long as it is bitter, and then spit out the wood. If you cough again, do this again. It very seldom fails to cure any dry cough. Or, make a hole through a lemon and fill it with honey. Roast it, and catch the juice. Take a tea-spoonful of this frequently.

EXTREME FAT

Use a total vegetable diet. I know one who was entirely cured of this, by living a year thus: she breakfasted and supped on milk and water (with bread) and dined on turnips, carrots, or other roots, drinking water.

THE HEAD-ACHE

Rub the head for a quarter of an hour. Or, apply to each temple the thin yellow rind of a lemon, newly pared off.

THE ILIAC [ILEAC] PASSION

[i.e., obstructed bowel]
Apply warm flannels soaked in spirits of wine. Or, hold a live puppy constantly on the belly.

Read more about John Wesley's *Primitive Physick* in an interview with Randy Maddox at *Faith & Leadership*: www.faithandleadership.com/qa/randy-maddox-john-wesley-says-take-care-yourself