Wesley: The Widening Horizon

by Leon O. Hynson

Pattern of Wesley's Ethical Development

Please consider with me the following claims based upon what I have emphasized to this point. First, that Aldersgate was the focal center of the theological foundation which Wesley laid. His spiritual pilgrimage from 1725 to 1738 which was consummated there was not the end of the road, but something of an apex which led on to higher levels of achievement. I would call this the era of Wesley's quest for spiritual certainty, a search frustrated by certain strands of his heritage which prevailed until Aldersgate.

Secondly, from Aldersgate to his proper "retirement" time (1768), he gave primary attention to developing the personal implications of the Gospel in evangelism, in saving faith in bringing about the experience of perfect love, in developing the church as society or *koinoinia,* in developing and emphasizing the sacraments of grace, and more. The primary goal was Christian maturity expressed as perfect love for God and man. After Aldersgate, Wesley became an evangelist motivated by the power of spontaneous love. His commitment to offer (please note, *offer)* Christ to the people in a dynamic but uncoercive way never waned as long as he lived. The principle of faith working by love expressed itself in vigorous evangelism. *He never turned aside from that quest.*

Before Aldersgate, about the year 1734, Wesley was asked to become curate to his father's church at Epworth. He was appalled. How could he possibly care for his own soul in this world, let alone the souls of a thousand people? It wasn't a bad question. But listen to what Wesley said shortly after Aldersgate, "I look upon the whole world as my parish." What a difference!

Thirdly, the theology of faith working by love assumed maturity in the last third of Wesley's ministry when he saw the need to further

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explicate the social import of Christian love. He was to make more explicit in his theology what had always been implicit, at least since Aldersgate. In the particular context of his era which was characterized by social demoralization, revolution and war, social migration, upheaval, uprootedness, unemployment, hunger — he applied his theology in a more precise, visible, and intentional manner. Now personal ethics, evangelism, and social ehtics converge together and flow together explicitly to the end of his life. From 1768 with his first major political tract, "The Origin of Power," to his last letter written to Wilberforce to uphold Wilberforce's effort to eliminate slavery, we recognize repeated illustrations of the widening horizon in Wesley's ethics. From 1768 to 1791, Wesley wrote fifteen important social, political and economic tracts. There are sermons, comments, letters, and journals which present the evangelist-reformer at work.

The Later Years

Here I want to diverge from the categorizing of Wesley's life and ministry in relation to faith and ethics in order to look at the larger scope of his activities during the final stage of his life, from approximately 1768 to the end of his days. The scene is London. The date is June of 1768. The man is John Wesley who has reached the retirement age of sixty-five. His resources: one set of silver, a horse, a few books. What will he live on in retirement? I suppose that the facetious answer might be a home in Georgia. The suggestion that John Wesley could have retired at the age of sixty-five is just so incredible that we can't grasp it. Unbelievable! More seriously, we are confronted with a task of assessing his ministry in this last trimester of his life to see what engaged the final thirty years before he summed up his life: "The best of all, God is with us."

Consider the content of his preaching during these years. To approach this large picture, remember that the major body of Wesleyan hymns, *Notes upon the New Testament,* and the *Standard Sermons* (some forty-four or the fifty-three, depending upon your interpretation) were completed before these years. Most of the *Standard Sermons* belong to the fourth decade of his life. Not one of the forty-four sermons was published after 1760 and only six were issued in the '50s. The other nine of the fifty-three belong to the '50s and '60s and only the sermon preached at Whitefield's funeral in 1770 spills over into the new decade. What does this mean? It means

that the primary documents on which Methodism rests were in place by the time we arrive at the third phase of Wesley's life. What was to occupy his thinking from that time on? Well, there are many other sermons. His published sermons cover a multitude of issues from A to Z, from "angels" (both good and evil) to "zeal" (good and bad). Social issues were addressed including the problems of revolution and war. His eschatological commentary is found in his focus on the final, ultimate restoration of creation addressed by Paul in Romans 8. A theology of history is found in his 1782 sermon on the "Mystery of Iniquity." Wesley's pietism is seen in his sermon concerning the church, preached in the 1780s, which focuses on purity of life more than doctrinal purity. In his best known sermon, "On Working Out Your Salvation," he develops some of the key concepts which we have come to deal with in his synergistic theology: "God has worked; therefore, you can work. God has worked; therefore, you must work." That is followed by his sermon of 1790 on the "Wedding Garment," which is a marvelous appeal for tolerance, for generosity of spirit, and includes (after fifty years) a treasured reminiscence of Aldersgate and justification by grace through faith. His sermon on conscience (1788) refers to Francis Hutcheson who developed a naturalistic ethics. It also recalls his grandfather Samuel Annesley's sermon in which he emphasized the theonomous ground for conscience. Two sermons on civil and political affairs entitled "National Sins and Miseries" and "The Late Work of God in North America" are noteworthy for Wesley's reflections concerning the American Revolution. These stress the grievous problems which were evoked, Wesley believed, by the sinfulness of the nation which was to blame for unemployment and hunger and war. In 1760, to dip back a little bit earlier than our period, he summarized Benjamin Franklin and others on "Electricity Made Plain and Useful," and he described himself as a "lover of mankind and of common sense."[1] In 1769 he wrote advice on health, suggesting appropriate prescriptions. He studied medicine because he was concerned about the inadequacy of the physicians of his time. He raised the question, "Does any man prescribe vomits or purges to kill fleas or lice?" He is saying that at times the cure is worse that the disease. Therefore, he rejected the practice of bleeding. "Alas," he said, "how few physicians love their neighbour as themselves?" He recommended the use of cobweb pills, claiming they had cured the ague for others nine or ten times. He cured his own fever by drinking lemonade. He wrote an introduction

to Jonathan Edwards' *Religious Affections* in 1773, and a collection of forms of prayer in 1775. He prepared *A Concise History of England* in four volumes in 1776. He described it as a Christian history for a Christian country. The *Arminian Magazine* was introduced in 1777. In 1790, the year before his death and his eighty-sixth year, he wrote prefaces to "An Essay on the Liberty of Moral Agents." In 1780-81, he prepared a synopsis of Baxter's *Saints Rest,* developed a philosophy of history, and edited an ecclesiastical history of four volumes drawn from Lorenz Mosheim, who taught at Gottingen. He said of Mosheim that he was a stranger to inward religion. This gives us a flavor of the kind of life that he lived. More than ever he demonstrated that he was both an evangelical Christian and a cosmopolitan man, for his mind was sharp, ranging over the human experience in religion, society, labor, health, education, family and state. His thought moved from earth to heaven and to hell. He cited the dean who told his audience, "If you do not repent, you will go to a place which I have too much manners to name before this good company."

The Political and Social Tracts

Let us move to the political tracts which occupied much of his time from 1768-83. In his "Thoughts on Liberty" published in 1772, he praises the liberty which is the right of every person. He published "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions," "Thoughts Upon Slavery," "A Calm Address to Our American Colonies," and "Observations on Liberty" in the next four years. Messages were addressed to the people of Great Britain and Ireland. He concluded with the question, "How far is it the duty of a Christian minister to preach politics?" His answer is a studied ambivalence. I believe, after studying these tracts for many years, that they represented (as far as I know) all of Wesley's substantial political interpretations and economic treatments, and he developed them in his last trimester of life. The last stages of life tend to become introspective, but that certainly cannot be said of Mr. Wesley.

Let's take a look at Wesley's tract, "Thoughts Upon Slavery."[3] Careful examination enables us to discover that it represents a paradigm for most of his social and political ethics. It was borrowed to a great degree from the Quaker, Anthony Benezet from Philadelphia, who had written several interpretations and critiques of American slavery. Wesley's "Thoughts Upon Slavery" reflects his familiar pattern of editing, condensing, and summing up the

arguments of the particular writer. That, of course, is how he was able to produce so much. Wesley's controversial "Calm Address to the American Colonies" was borrowed from Dr. Samuel Johnson. Johnson was pleased with Wesley's approval. Wesley in his "Thoughts Upon Slavery" developed the emotional and sympathetic approach found in Benezet in the first two-thirds of his interpretation. There he diverges from Benezet and begins to develop four or five major arguments. Since studying Benezet's tract and getting feedback from others, I conclude that the rest of the tract is Wesley's own work. His first argument against slavery is that it is a contradiction of natural law. Enough positive laws (or legislated laws) cannot be legislated in order to overcome the power of the law which is established in the universe by God himself. We may establish 10,000 laws, but that will not obviate the power of God's law written at large in nature and perceptible to reasonable mankind. Wesley develops his critique by suggesting that to be truly human Man must, first of all, avoid slaveholding. A slave cannot possibly exercise his liberty, the right of conscience or live within the proper limits of mobility. To be human, Man must enjoy liberty: freedom of conscience, civil liberty, religious liberty. Man cannot express his humanity apart from the freedom God has given him. In this tract Wesley does not refer to Scripture, except at the very end of his appeal. He repeats the psalm which describes the deliverance of the captives from Babylonia, and declares a praise that the *all-mighty* God would so work in the lives of people that the captives would be able to return home again. It seems to me this is a reflection two hundred years ago of the kind of argument we have developed in the "history of salvation."

"Thoughts Upon Slavery" is a paradigm of his interpretations found throughout the tracts. He notes that there are some basic human rights which must be recognized, that those rights are life and liberty, property and happiness. These are familiar themes for the era. Wesley's concern for the values of life are expressed in concert with many other voices in his era: liberal, evangelical, revolutionary, and conservative. But Wesley differed from many people in his time on the basis by which life could bear its distinctive worth. He believed that because Man has been created in the image of God, life possesses value. Life has meaning because humanity is free. Man is rational and self-conscious, like God, in the power of self-analysis, able cognitively and spiritually to step out and apart from himself. In that

power, Man understands the meaning of life from God's point of view. Life had meaning for Wesley, both on the quantitative and qualitative levels. It is possible to be physically alive and spiritually dead; physically alive, but enslaved to another, hence, not in full possession of divinely given humanity; physically alive, but so deprived of the essentials of life that subsistence is impossible. Each of these, spiritual life, freedom, and meaningful life are contained in Wesley's evaluation of life.

Liberty should be recognized as the centerpiece of Wesley's political thought.[4] In his Temple University dissertation, Thomas Hoffman analyzed Wesley's moral philosophy and concluded that freedom was the philosophical principle which sustained and gave coherence to Wesley's interpretation of human existence.[5] Wesley claimed that freedom is the ground on which true existence can become a reality for every person and this moral dynamic supplies the basis for authentic selfhood. It is the condition by which Man becomes a real person. Wesley was committed to the principle of liberty in a number of realms — freedom of the will, freedom of worship and freedom in the context of church and state. His politics and his eccelesiology are shaped by a central commitment to liberty, both civil and religious.

But what is Wesley's definition of liberty? Like many others in his day, it included civil and religious liberty. Civil liberty to him meant the freedom to exercise responsibly the rights which belong to every citizen. His definition of civil liberty is grounded in political reality, that is, the guarantees of the state to every citizen. But he defines religious liberty in a broader context, linking political and theological guarantees. He says:

> Religious liberty is a liberty to choose our own religion; to worship God according to our own conscience. Every man living as a man has a right to this, as he is a rational creature. The Creator gave him this right when he endowed him with understanding; and every man must judge for himself, because every man must give an account of himself to God. Consequently, this is an unalienable right. It is inseparable from humanity; and God did never give authority to any man or any number of men to deprive any child of man thereof.[6]

It is important to recognize the way in which this whole concept of liberty shapes his political and social ethics. He could never forget that his grandparents and great-grandparents had suffered greatly at the hands of the political state, which in England was so closely linked to the church. He was always committed to the principle that the state and the church must affirm the right of every person to practice in conscience what one truly believes. Hoffman, commenting on Wesley's position that every judgment we make must be our own or else we are not accountable, states, "Conscience is the faculty which must be postulated as the means for Man to be conscious of the value of these judgings."[7] And conscience must always be corrected by the Word of God.

Consider the question of property. Wesley's economic ethics, like his other ethical judgments, represent a serious attempt to come to terms with Scripture. He gives evidence of a clear suspicion of the corrosive influence of riches and the way riches are employed. His primary persuasion appears to be informed more by a Christian concept of community than by an appeal for the development of capital. In his development of the "Protestant ethic," Max Weber taught that the principles of industry and thrift, taught in Calvin's theological ethics, led to the rise of capitalism. Wherever the Christian religion performed its proper work, believers became zealous workmen using their talents not for debauchery but for the service of God. This led to the accumulation of capital. Hard work resulted in a high level of production. This was paralleled by careful and conscientious consumption. Certainly, it was argued, the serious Christian must avoid conspicuous consuption and waste. Indulgence is a style of life contrary to the example of Christ and his disciples. Weber concluded that this interpretation was also characteristic of the life of John Wesley. Wesley had written, "I fear whenever riches have increased that the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion, for religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase so will pride, anger, and love of the world and all of its branches."[8] It is nonetheless necessary to argue that while Wesley approves industry and thrift, his economic ethic resists the simple accumulation of capital for profit's sake. While it is permissible to note his advice, "Earn all you can," from his famous sermon on money and its sequel, "Save All You Can," his definitive word is "Give all you can." A German brother was listening to the sermon as Wesley declaimed: "Earn all you can."

He said, "Amen, good preaching."

"Save all you can," added Wesley, and the German brother echoed his first "amen."

And then Wesley said, "Give all you can," and the German brother's response was: "Ach! Spoiled a good sermon."

Wesley's definitive word, I believe, is one of stewardship — "give all you can." Accumulation as a means of stewardship is an uncommon virtue. Conspicuous consumption contradicts Christian values. Surely, any idea that money should be employed primarily to make more money is not Wesleyan. Money is for meeting one's own basic needs and for meeting the needs of others. Wesley is affirming Christian stewardship as an alternative to capitalism. Recognizing that capital accumulation will emerge where diligent labors are found, he rejects the waste that accompanies selfish use of money. We earn in order that we may share with those who do not have.

Wesley's era was the time of Adam Smith's laissez-faire economics. According to Smith, the nation's best interests were to be gained by individual betterment. Every person must have the right to better his circumstances without the obstruction of economic laws. The unfettered development of individual interests represents the route of the wealth of society, hence Smith's title *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of the Nation.* Smith claimed that a nation's wealth lay in expansion of trade and industry. His theory of value was designed to enhance the productivity of every economically active individual. The upshot of this interpretation was to create an atmosphere in which some people were overwhelmed. Where did John Wesley stand? I reaffirm that John Wesley stood as a representative of the Christian moral order. That moral order shapes every order of life including the economic order. His famous tract, "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions," spells out his belief that there is terrible waste in the land.[9] Waste that cannot be recognized as consistent in a land where some people are so desperately hungry that they go to the dung heaps for a little food. Wesley himself gave away a fortune, maintaining only the simple necessities of life. He argued that individuals have no right to the trappings of polite society, pictures on the wall, fancy clothing, gourmet tastes, when so many are hungry or poor and unclothed. Wesley suggested several steps that should be taken to alleviate the problems. The staggering amounts of grain used for alcohol should be turned toward the feeding of the poor and hungry. He asserted

that there should be tax redistribution in order for conditions of unemployment to be corrected. He believed that the people who were ordinarily able to employ the poor were unable to keep up with their expenses and taxes and, therefore, they had to lay off their workers. Along with that, there was the enclosure movement which drove the poor off the land into the cities. On the farms, they had been able to raise a few chickens, a few pigs, a garden. That was lost and they were hungry and cold and starving. The condition of miners was tragic. Someone described the miner as half-naked, hungry, filthy, crawling out of a hole with a load of coal on his back. Conditions were clearly dehumanizing. Such circumstances needed to be modified, even by government action, Wesley argued, in order that everyone might have at least enough to live at a subsistence level.

The Final Stage

We turn now to the last stages of his life. On June 28, 1790 he wrote, "This day I enter into my eighty-eighth year. For above 86 years I found none of the infirmities of old age. My eyes did not wax dim, neither did my natural strength abate, but last August I found almost a sudden change. My eyes were so dim that no glasses would help me, but I feel no pain from head to foot, only it seems that nature is exhausted and humanly speaking will sink more and more till the weary springs of life stand still at last."[10] He preached at Bristol on August 29 and had to shorten the service to three hours because he had no one to read prayers. His journal closes on October 24, 1790, with notes on the two sermons he had preached at Spittlefield and Chadwell churches. There's one sequence in this period of time during which he preached sixteen times in sixteen days. Finally, the weary springs of life did stand still. Wesley summed up the whole pilgrimage of eighty-seven years: over sixty years of ministry, preaching 40,000 sermons; of journeys to the world parish in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Germany, Holland; writing more than 400 books, essays, and tracts; and under God changing the spiritual and moral direction of the nation, he summed it all up with the words, "The best of all, God is with us." Retirement! With adequate pension! At home!

Footnotes

[1]For this extended summary of Wesley's writings, see his *Works* XIV, pp. 199-345.

[2]See *Works* XI, pp. 14-163 for the political, social, and economic tracts published after 1768.

[3]Ibid., pp. 59-79.

[4]See his two tracts on liberty in Ibid., pp. 34-46, 90-118.

[5]Thomas G. Hoffman, "The Moral Philosophy of John Wesley: The Development of his Moral Dynamic." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 1968, p. 59.

[6]*Works,* XI, p. 92.

[7]Hoffman, p. 196.

[8]This quotation by Weher is found in Robert W. Green, *Protestantism and Capitalism* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Company, 1959), p. 19. It is found in essence in Wesley's sermon: "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity" *Works,* VII, pp. 289-290.

[9]*Works* XI, pp. 53-58.

[10]*Journal,* in *Works,* IV, p. 490.